Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Hide and Seek with Freud's Uncanny

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"the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." (Freud, 1)[1]

Abstract

In this paper I will use Freud's conception of the uncanny as a lens through which to view Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I will use *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as my primary text; however, I will also draw on *Through the Looking Glass* for context. In 1919, nearly half a century after the Alice stories, Freud conceptualized the uncanny, borrowing the term from Dr. Jentsch, a psychiatrist. This paper will use Freud's structure of the uncanny as way to understand and engage with the Alice stories. Freud describes the uncanny as horror at the resurfacing of something repressed—usually trauma—which was once familiar (thus the original German word "unheimlich"—unhomely). By tracing Freud's uncanny in these works, we can reveal that the *Alice* stories are full of uncanny situations. Often, these uncanny situations make meta-statements about the definition of the uncanny itself within the genres of fairy tales and children's literature. By grappling with what might be defined as the uncanny in Carroll's stories, I hope to uncover the mechanisms at work behind the scenes in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I draw on children's literature theorists Jacqueline Rose, Perry Nodelman, and James Kincaid, as well as George Butte's "The Ricochet Effect," to locate the *Alice* stories within a history of attempts to define and encase children via children's literature. Each of these theorists note the multiplicity of audiences present in children's literature and the resulting

[1] English translations of the German word unheimlich will use "uncanny."

confusions. Despite its nominal implication, the genre 'children's literature' is predominately populated and driven by adult voices, concerns, and traumas. This sets in motion a multiplicity of child and adult voices echoing around a children's literature text. George Butte's "The Ricochet Effect" provides an organizing framework from which to understand the multiplicity of audiences stemming from a text. Butte—along with Rose and Nodelman—notes that implied child readers overhearing angry adult voices (as occurs in Peter Pan and other children's literature) could be harmful to an implied child reader. Rose locates children's literature as a space in which adults attempt to smooth out their own trauma—in particular, fractured sexuality—by imposing an expectation upon implied child readers within children's literature. The expectation is that a child can be simplified to and defined as an unformed adult, and that the child will complete this journey in an un-fractured and linear manner, thus soothing adult anxieties about this not being the case in their own lives. Using Freud's lens, I trace how adults can come to view real children as uncanny, a tension which plays out in the *Alice* stories and raises questions about what has an uncanny effect on whom in Wonderland.

Freud's Uncanny

In 1906, Dr. Ernst Jentsch, a German psychiatrist, coined the term "unheimlich"[2] in his *Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen* (*On the Psychology of the Uncanny*). In his article, Jentsch traces a rigid, angular path around the unheimlich—the clash between foreign and familiar. He is interested in the "lack of orientation" resulting from this confrontation. Jentsch's first example is the sunrise. A man sees the sun rise every day. One day he learns the sun does not rise on its own. It moves in the sky because the earth rotates. The sun was once familiar, but now there is a new piece of information that was hiding there all along. The man is disoriented. Jentsch briskly

[2] The English translation is "uncanny"

marches us by a series of examples like this one: a masked ball, loss of hearing, mechanical dolls, mental illness. His torch is "critical sense," and he is convinced the shadows will flee from reason:

> Intellectual certainty provides psychical shelter in the struggle for existence. However it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected. (Jentsch, 16)

The paper is brief. Its conclusion gestures toward mastery of our surroundings as a tool to banish the uncanny (if we are so inclined). Jentsch neatly creates and banishes the uncanny in the space of one paper, with only a few mechanical eyes and sunrises left over. To shudder at a skeleton would now be naïve.

In 1919, Freud redefined Jentsch's uncanny in *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*), saying "it is not difficult to see that this [Jentsch's] definition is incomplete" (Freud, 2). Freud does not move away from Jentsch's definition; he overlays it with repression. Freud defines the uncanny as a horror that derives its terror from being something that an individual found homelike or familiar, but that individual has repressed. "For this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old—established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression." (Freud, 17).[3] Objects or scenarios which recall the once-suppressed uncanny are what cause dread. After all, the uncanny was repressed for a reason (Freud, 17). In place of Jentsch's sun, Freud invokes the womb. We move from a sun who was a freely

[3] Freud bases his definition of the uncanny on the pyschoanalytic theory that repression changes emotional effects into morbid anxiety (Freud, 3).

acknowledged friend to a watery home which was once desired, but the desire must now be hidden. “An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.” (Freud, 17).

Freud spends a large portion of his essay debunking Jentsch’s prescription of “intellectual certainty” to exorcise the uncanny.[4] If for Jentsch we may banish the uncanny through education, for Freud this is impossible. This is because whatever act is “banishing” for Jentsch becomes “repression” for Freud, and something that is repressed is still present. While Jentsch argues that education will dissipate superstition, Freud argues education only represses superstition. He postulates that while we may have surmounted the superstitions our primitive forefathers held, “we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation” (Freud, 17).

Freud traces two types of uncanny: the superstition that has been surmounted and the childhood complex that has been repressed. The line between the two is “hazy,” complicating his search for an easy exorcism (Freud, 18).[5] Freud stages his investigation largely in childhood, which for him is a primitive origin teeming with ghosts.

Fiction also teems with ghosts, and fiction and childhood are two overlaid worlds. Freud distinguishes between uncanny in real life and uncanny in fiction, noting that fiction is both “a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life” and “in the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in real life,” and vice versa (Freud,

[4] “There is no question, therefore, of any ‘intellectual uncertainty’; we know now that we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman’s imagination behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree. The theory of ‘intellectual uncertainty’ is thus incapable of explaining that impression.” (Freud, 7)

[5] By “solution” we mean a prescription such as Jentsch’s for the uncanny, or some way to make the uncanny less uncomfortable through understanding.

18). Since the line between fiction and reality is especially blurred for children, childhood (especially children's literature) produces a rich opportunity for the uncanny:

> an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes, and so on. It is this element which contributes not a little to the uncanny effect attaching to magical practices. The infantile element in this, which also holds sway in the minds of neurotics, is the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with physical reality" (Freud, 15).

Fiction becomes a landscape on which to create and confront the uncanny. An uncanny skeleton may resurrect only to bleed when stabbed. The uncanny lingers, especially for children. A child on Freud's scene is someone who displays an over-accentuation of psychical reality. He is therefore more vulnerable to the footprints of an uncanny moment, indiscriminately of whether it occurred in physical or psychical reality.

Through a Freudian lens of childlike vulnerability to the uncanny, especially in fiction, we can consider Carroll's *Alice* chronicles.[6] The *Alice* adventures consistently land on the confluence of uncanny and not. They provide a meta-commentary that jumps the line between the uncanny in real life and the uncanny in fiction. The first example of this is Alice's classic fall down the rabbit hole, which is also the book's first death joke. She is falling down an endless hole, but when she lands, she will end up "not a bit hurt," since we are in a fictional hole accompanying a fictional girl with fictional bones. This hole is weird, but probably not uncanny,

[6] Reference to the *Alice* chronicles will constitute primary focus on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with occasional reference to *Through the Looking Glass* for context.

until Alice remarks, “after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!” to which the narrator remarks, “(Which was very likely true.)” (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 4). Alice is not hurt in the fictional world of Wonderland, but in the real world within this book, gravity would kill her. This is just the beginning. The *Alice* adventures are constantly shifting perspective on the uncanny, offering a view of the same experience or object in fiction and then in reality, from the perspective of a child to the perspective of an adult (or animal), all while asking where the uncanny property was lost, and where it was regained.

Fiction and Fairy Tales

A fairy tale as a genre has power over the effect of the uncanny. Freud argues that the uncanny is flipped in the fairy tale. Uncanny themes such as catalepsy and re-animation of the dead lose their uncanny quality, and “In fairy-stories feelings of fear— including uncanny sensations—are ruled out altogether. We understand this, and that is why we ignore the opportunities we find for any development of a feeling of this kind.” (Freud, 19). But why exactly are they ruled out altogether?

We may find the answer in a nebulous definition—collection of defining characteristics —of what is culturally expected of a fairytale. Bruno Bettelheim’s criteria for fairy tales is: “Far from making demands, the fairy tale reassures, gives hope for the future, and holds out the promise of a happy ending.” (Bettelheim, 34). Marina Warner claims that “Fairy tales are stories that try to find the truth and give us glimpses of greater things—this is the principle that

underlies their growing presence" (Warner, 178). If Freud's uncanny fundamentally unsettles us by forcing us to face repressed desires or fears, perhaps fairy tales attempt to soothe that confrontation. Fairy stories try to show us "greater things" while reassuring us about the future. Even if we do spot a wicked witch, we trust that she will not succeed in eating Hansel and Gretel, since we have the promise of a happy ending. We also might believe that since the fairy tale allowed us to see the witch at all, this sighting might even be to show us better things. Neither Bettelheim nor Warner claim that fairy tales avoid the uncanny, but perhaps fairy tales face the uncanny with a reassuring and hopeful attitude. Bettelheim values fairy tales as a space to externalize and resolve anxieties of inner world, especially for young children. They are the place to safely meet the uncanny.

But why are fairy tales more or less successful in soothing the uncanny where real life and other fiction is not? Perhaps it is because we are promised a happy ending. No other reality or fiction genre gives us this promise. A promise for a happy ending bans anxiety. If we as a narratee audience (child or adult) accept this promise, it limits the level of anxiety we can feel during a story. If the wicked witch is preparing to cook Hansel, we don't need to feel too anxious, because after all, there has to be a happy ending.

Perhaps this reveals that the uncanny draws on anxiety. I am not the first person to argue this; Jentsch does as well. Although, unlike Jentsch, I will argue that the uncanny is only partially affected by anxiety. The uncanny does not necessarily equal anxiety, as Jentsch might suggest. But if the uncanny pulls its potency partially from anxiety, then it would explain why we can completely rule out any feelings of the uncanny that might surface in a fairy tale if we are promised a happy ending. Again, as Warner and Bettelheim point out, it is not that a fairy tale avoids the uncanny, but exactly the opposite: a fairy tale offers a safe, reassuring space to

confront the uncanny. And if we were worried about how this confrontation might turn out, the certainty of a happy ending banishes anxiety exactly proportionally to how fully we accept its promise.

But who has that much trust? Why would an implied reader ignore any opportunity for the development of uncanny feelings, even if they are promised a happy ending? Nodelman notes that the most trusting of all implied readers is the child reader, who will live the fairy tale. So really, the effect of the uncanny in a fairy tale (or any fiction or reality) depends in part upon the audience.[7] A more suspicious real reader might not totally dismiss the uncanny. An adult reader might suspect the prince's intentions toward Cinderella, or that Snow White might not be slightly decayed after being dead for so long. Many adult readers might read the phrase "happily ever after" with deep suspicion, and suspicion immediately collapses the fairy tale world. This is why questions are taboo in fairy tales (Nodelman, 17), and why these adult readers are not the implied readers. The uncanny arises when anxiety and suspicion arise. The ingredients fairy tales need to deflate (but perhaps not dismiss) the uncanny, then, are the promise of a happy ending (with reassurance and hope along the way) combined with an audience who will unquestioningly accept this promise. Among the scenes where the uncanny may surface, the fairy tale is ideal for these conditions.

But, as Nodelman notes, the *Alice* stories violate these conditions almost immediately (Nodelman, 17). If Bettelheim sets the criteria for fairy tales, the *Alice* stories breaks them, comments on them, and then temporarily attempts to reinstate them, all while claiming to be a fairy tale. We may then ask the natural question: are the *Alice* stories fairy tales? Both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* delight in insinuating that they are fairy tales: "When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now

[7] In children's literature, there are a multiplicity of audiences to sort out (Butte, The Ricochet Effect).

here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought!" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 46), and "Thy loving smile will surely hail // The love-gift of a fairy-tale." (Through the Looking Glass). But asking whether or not the Alice stories fit the criterion of a fairy tale is a trap; the better question is, "What do the Alice stories say *about* fairy tales?"[8]

The last thing we want to do is to take Carroll at his word. We are not obligated to accept from Carroll that his stories are fairy tales, especially when, as Carroll points out, words and their definitions can mean so many different things. For instance, in *Through the Looking Glass* we find a conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty that strongly invokes the gap between signified and sign which Derrida would later structure in *Of Grammatology*:

"'And only *one* for birthday presents, you know. There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean— neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'" (Through the Looking Glass, 81). This conversation implies that Carroll—the writer of this story—intends to be master. Alice the character is at a disadvantage because she not catching on to the game

[8] Nodelman writes: "In a sense *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* operates as a metafictional account of any reader's encounter with any fictional world." (Nodelman, 17).

(because Carroll writes her that way). The conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty makes clear that Carroll is not a fair game-maker. All the riddles will be in his favor. The child-character Alice is subject to his whims as a writer. Terrorizing a child with hopeless riddles is perhaps not very soothing for an implied child reader—a criterion for a fairy-tale according to Bettelheim.

The Alice stories push Bettelheim's criteria for fairy tales to their boundaries and beyond. But they do not accomplish this without breaking some rules, too, and this is why the *Alice* stories act so distinctly as a commentary on these criteria. For instance, Bettelheim posits that the fairy tale is not supposed to refer to the outside world, but in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the world outside of Wonderland is Alice's referential lifeline. She cannot help but refer to it, with rather uncanny-invoking consequences:

> The mouse did not answer, so Alice went on eagerly: "There is such a nice little dog near our house I should like to show you! A little bright-eyed terrier, you know, with oh! such long curly brown hair! And it'll fetch things when you throw them, and it'll sit up and beg for its dinner, and all sorts of things—I can't remember half of them—and it belongs to a farmer, you know, and he says it's so useful, it's worth a hundred pounds! He says it kills all the rats and—oh dear!" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 27)

Alice shatters the fairy tale illusion of conversing with a mouse by referencing its murder in reality within that same conversation. She cannot help but to relate to the mouse she sees in Wonderland by drawing on her knowledge of mice in her original reality. Her knowledge from the world outside Wonderland will always inform her experience of it. But who is to say Alice the character's experience is any different from the experience of a real reader of a fairy tale?

Alice the character constantly ruptures Bettelheim's criteria for a fairy tale by referring to the outside world. Using this rupture, Carroll makes a point about fairy tales that Freud will also make: the uncanny in a story is dependent upon with which character the implied reader identifies. Freud makes this argument by examining a story with a severed hand:

> We have already asked why it is that the severed hand in the story of the treasure of Rhainpsenitus has no uncanny effect in the way that Hauff's story of the severed hand has. The question seems to us to have gained in importance now that we have recognized that class of the uncanny which proceeds from repressed complexes to be the more durable of the two. The answer is easy. In the Herodotus story our thoughts are concentrated much more on the superior cunning of the master-thief than on the feelings of the princess. The princess may well have had an uncanny feeling, indeed she very probably fell into a swoon; but we have no such sensations, for we put ourselves in the thief's place, not in hers. (Freud, 19).

Freud does not specify who precisely is doing the sympathizing here, instead settling for the plural personal pronouns—"our thoughts…but we have no such sensations, for we put ourselves"—and so we will have to work this out ourselves. By "we" Freud seems to often mean literally himself—"The question seems to us"—to express his opinion or findings. In the above paragraph Freud could be continuing to use "we" to explain his personal experience as a real reader of the Herodotus text. Or he could be using "we" to assume that what follows represents any implied narratee's response to the text. This seems more likely since it would mean Freud is arguing something universal (the former interpretation would still support Freud's point, but more weakly). The universal idea Freud appears to be arguing is that an implied narratee of Herodotus will resonate with the uncanny invoked by the character they most sympathize with.

Freud is consistently so vague about who he means to be feeling an "uncanny effect" that this might be an incomplete interpretation; however, since Freud is making a statement about "we" putting ourselves in a character's place (the thief's), an action often performed by an implied narratee, it seems appropriate to argue the "we" is implied narratee(s).

Since in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is the protagonist (and thus the most likely character to draw an implied reader's sympathy), a fairy tale would ask that Alice identify with the animals and cease to eat them (or even talk about their deaths) to avoid invoking an uncanny effect for the implied reader. But in order for this to function, an implied reader's sympathies must align with the protagonist. This may work for Alice, who is a human protagonist, but it might become an ontological stretch when the implied reader perceives a fairy tale's protagonist as fundamentally different from them (which might be the case if, for instance, the Mouse was the protagonist).[9] Through Alice's conversation with the mouse, Carroll demonstrates that fairy tales may flip the uncanny by orchestrating which characters the implied audience identifies with.

Depending on which characters are drawing the implied reader's sympathy, the implied reader desires a happy ending for them, and a fairy tale promises this. If this does not happen, the uncanny is ready to seize hold of the implied audience. Naturally, then, Carroll deliberately breaks this promise:

> She crossed her hands on her lap, as if she were saying lessons, and began to repeat it, but her voice sounded hoarse and strange, and the words did not come the same as they used to do:—
>
> "How doth the little crocodile

[9] Nodelman argues that fictional texts written for children do demand "in a particularly intense way" of their implied narratee (Nodelman, 18).

Improve his shining tail,

And pour the waters of the Nile

On every golden scale!

How cheerfully he seems to grin,

How neatly spreads his claws,

And welcome little fishes in

With gently smiling jaws!"

"I'm sure those are not the right words," said poor Alice, and her eyes filled with tears (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 21-22)

Inclusions of short stories like this within the larger works of the *Alice* stories confound an implied reader's attempts to reach a happy ending. Certainly, Alice wakes up at the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to find herself "safe" with her sister, but she travels across many unsettling endings in between. If Freud supposes that the uncanny will be evaded in a story if the implied reader identifies with someone who is not experiencing the uncanny, Carroll breaks this supposition by inserting "How doth the little crocodile" into his story. All the tools Freud identifies to diffuse the uncanny are present in this poem: an implied narratee identifies with the crocodile (the narrator introduces him first as the protagonist), he has a "shining tale" (he is physically attractive), he *seems* "cheerful," and he gets a happy ending by eating his dinner of fishes. However, the poem creates confusion by introducing a second implied reader within the story. The implied reader for "How doth the little crocodile" may identify with the crocodile, but the implied reader of *Alice's Adventures of Wonderland*, the frame story for this poem, may not identify with the crocodile (after all, shortly after this poem, Alice will be scolded by the

mouse for praising cats who murder rats) and is too busy feeling sad along with Alice at not remembering the poem correctly ("her eyes filled with tears"). An implied reader—one that might not be intended to take anything happening here at face value—might be recognizing the poem which "How doth the little crocodile" parodies and feeling chilled by the change. Perhaps it is the irony of the second stanza which is unsettling—the crocodile seems to grin, but is he actually grinning? He welcomes little fishes, but it is not the welcome they think it is. His "gently smiling" jaws aren't that gentle, since an implied reader would know (by referring to our knowledge outside of Wonderland) that the crocodile is going to snap those jaws shut. Of course, maybe the implied reader wasn't supposed to identify with the crocodile; maybe the little fishes were the protagonist. But then, technically we cannot admit that there is going to be an unhappy ending for them, unless we draw on our knowledge from outside Wonderland and assume that the crocodile will eat these fish. Like Alice, an implied reader cannot help doing so.

Of course, Carroll points out that if an implied reader going to identify with crocodiles, they're not stretching themselves too far, since little girls are like serpents. Alice learns this when her neck elongates and she meets a Pigeon. The Pigeon demands Alice leave on the grounds that Alice is a serpent:

> "I *have* tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."
>
> "I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say."
>
> This was such a new idea to Alice, that she was quite silent for a minute or two, which gave the Pigeon the opportunity of adding, " You're looking for eggs, I know *that* well enough; and what does it matter to me whether you're a little girl or a serpent?"

"It matters a good deal to *me,"* said Alice hastily (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 73).

Perhaps Wonderland is demanding of an implied reader why they find might certain things uncanny, but others not. Why do they cringe at a serpent eating eggs out of a nest but not a little girl having breakfast? Why might an implied reader be so insistent, like Alice, that humans are not like serpents? The Pigeon does make a very good point: both humans and serpents both after eggs. Carroll could be making a point that anticipates the one Derrida later makes in *The Animal I Therefore Am*: what is, after all, an ontological stretch for a human to identify with? Is it really that much harder for an implied audience to identify with a serpent or a crocodile than it is to identify with Alice? At this point the hostilities like the Pigeon's accusations and the Mouse's offense toward Alice (and toward the implied reader via Alice) make much more sense: perhaps Alice is the villain in the story. Perhaps an implied reader of the *Alice* stories is entering a world where their allegiances are all wrong.[10] What does it mean to be the villain of a fairy tale, and can an implied reader really escape the uncanny if they are the ones causing it?

What is so uncanny about identifying with animals? In *The Animal I Therefore Am*, Derrida traces a deep, repressed shame (and shame for feeling that shame) that is thought to separate humans from animals: animals are ostensibly naked without knowing it. In Wonderland, the animals clothe themselves to meet Alice. They invite her to join their world, to see meals from their perspective. What if Alice accepted this invitation? What would happen if she decided the difference between her and the animals is arbitrary and joined them in nakedness (both physically and with knowledge tabula rasa)? She doesn't (in fact as Kincaid notes, Alice is

[10] This depends on what moral framework the implied reader is using—Alice's, the mouse's, the pigeon's, or someone else's.

constantly declining invitations from the animals), but what might be uncanny for an implied adult reader (but not necessarily an implied child reader) is that Alice might.[11] She might not even come home. But would Alice identifying with the animals and staying in Wonderland be uncanny for the implied child audience?

Audience: Uncanny Children

In *The Case for Peter Pan: the Impossibility of Children's Literature*, Jacqueline Rose explores what she describes as the enclosing effect of children's literature on real and implied child readers. For Rose, children's literature relies on an impossibility: the relationship between a child and an adult (Rose, 1). Children's literature, which is written and purchased by adults, is an adult world pretending to be a children's world. They then invite the children in. Rose's problem with this world is that it has no accountability, no mechanism to restrain adults from defining children's literature entirely on adult terms. Childhood is, after all, a concept created and maintained by adults. Since adults hold all the strings, the adult is always first in children's literature. The impossibility is that children's literature, by the nature of its very name, claims to be for the child, when it cannot be.

Perry Nodelman has his concerns with Rose's arguments, but he ultimately agrees with this point: children's literature is a scene in which the adult is master. Nodelman traces this via what he calls shadow texts: messages found in children's literature which state something other than what is overtly stated in their simple language. The problem is to which reader these shadow texts are addressed, since an implied adult reader is the reader most likely to understand

[11] Kincaid actually calls the idea that Alice might stay in Wonderland forever simultaneously uncanny and desirable to an adult implied audience.

all of the texts, from overt to shadow. Since as Nodelman notes, an adult implied audience has access to all the subtexts in children's literature, they are the masters of this world.

If the adult comes first in children's literature, then adult anxieties also come first. Bettelheim notices a series of dichotomies in children's literature, one of which is the home/away dichotomy. Children adventure away, always to return home. In fact, it might be a source of anxiety to a character that they will never return home. For instance, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* Alice wonders if she will ever return home. But even if a child character is the mouthpiece for this anxiety, whose anxiety is it really? Would a real child, or even an implied child reader, want Alice to return home? Carroll claims in the poem preceding *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that the Liddell girls did not want to leave Wonderland: they plead for another story, more adventures, and "Thus grew the tale of Wonderland" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland). Whose anxiety might it be it that Alice returns home? Perhaps it is a parental adult implied reader who might worry that his real child would take example from Alice the character if Alice enjoyed Wonderland entirely without any thought of home. Alice the character's anxiety thus soothes the adult implied reader's anxiety and retains Alice the character within the bounds of childhood. For Kincaid, Alice's character is desirable because of her elusiveness. Particularly focused on *Peter Pan* and the *Alice* stories, Kincaid notes tones of desire in the relationship between the implied adult reader and the child character. Kincaid notes that Peter and Alice hold appeal for adult desire as they dance in and out of the role of a child, and they retain their allure by never being fixed in their role. They are both trapping themselves in childhood and attempting to escape it.

But what is childhood? Rose and Nodelman claim that we truly do not know. However, this does not stop adults from defining what childhood should be according to their own desires.

Rose claims that *Peter Pan* shows innocence not as a property childhood but as a portion of adult desire (Rose, xii), and Nodelman notes that children's literature teaches children how to pretend to be childlike.[12]

The adult need to teach children to be childlike makes children's literature a battleground for Nodelman and Rose. Rose sees writing for children as an act of rivalry with the child. Even language itself is war between the child and the adult (Rose, 73). Adults see children as a threat. Rose traces in Barrie's texts an uneasiness about the child for the adult. The adult is uneasy that the child might learn the language they are using better than the adult, and in this way the child might usurp him. Rose argues that adults try to push children into a space that make adults feel secure. Nodelman builds on this by noting how eager adults are to convince children that they are in need of adult definitions and guidance. Adults do not just define childhood for children, but they are also careful to sell it to them. They argue that they need to shelter children from the horrors of adulthood (Nodelman, 202). They argue that children are ignorant (and they tell them so).[13] They use these tactics to explain what it means to be childish to children: a child's role is that of innocence and ignorance (and so children pretend to be these things, Nodelman argues). Nodelman, like Rose, then argues that adults in reality define childhood not in terms of any universal truths, but instead in terms of what makes adults most confident and secure in their own position. Childhood, then, is perhaps partly a black hole, an idea against which adults can define themselves. Without "child," what does the world "adult" mean? The manual on how to be a child is children's literature, and thus children's literature exposed to be the opposite of what it claims to be: a manual of how to become an adult. Children's literature has the mission to

[12] "We say "pretend" because in order for a child to understand how adults wish them to act in his role as child, he has to understand their messages, an act which removes any possibility of this act being genuine" (Nodelman, 210).

[13] Nodelman relies heavily on the text *The Purple Jar*, wherein a young girl makes a foolish mistake that the text reveals could have been avoided if she had listened to the adult in the story.

make children much less threatening to adult power. The question surfaces: Is it safe to be childlike?[14] Safe for whom? Rose concludes (along with Nodelman and Kincaid) that children learn through children's literature the safest place is to be is a state of pretending to be where those in power want you.

Adults find children threatening. "The 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." (Freud, 1). The uncanny is a threat. It might be a psychological threat, or it might be a physical threat, but adults do not wait to find out which it is. They see it as a threat because it is the resurfacing of something they once repressed. It is no coincidence that Freud directly traces the uncanny to childhood. This is why adults feel the need to teach children how to be childish, where that childishness is safe for the adult.[15] Nodelman identifies the adult agenda in shadow texts which tell the implied child reader how to exist in an adult world. Jacqueline Rose sees the adult agenda in children's literature to be a conquest on children made by adults. Surfacing out of both writers' work is the fact that there are two implied readers in children's literature: the adult and the child, where the adult implied reader always comes first. In fact, Nodelman notes that in shadow texts the narrator—a second adult voice against the child protagonist's voice—is the voice that the child protagonist (and the child implied reader) are often meant to identify more closely with by the end of the book. This signifies the ever-present idea in children's literature that a child is an adult-in-the-making. Thus, the 'child' as a mindset and character is a space that is shrinking from the moment the book begins. However, the adult space remains stable and collects the space conceded from the child's domain. As Alice asserts, "one can't help growing older" (Looking Glass, 79). Rose calls this process a capturing or securing of the child. Most children's books journey through the change

[14] "Childlike" meaning what adults define childhood as.
[15] "It is not necessarily safe for the child, but that is dedicatedly claimed by adults anyway" (Nodelman, 202).

from adult to child to the point where it could be questioned whether the child protagonist is a child after all at the end of the book.

So why are children, who are destined to be adults, given a space of childhood at all in children's literature? Kincaid traces this to adult desire. This, coupled with Nodelman's comment that children's literature is designed to teach children to pretend to be childlike, seems to point to Rose's conclusion that children's literature secures the child. It secures the child precisely within pretending childlikeness, a category which shrinks over the course of a children's book. Children's literature convinces children (implied readers who are real children) to pretend to confine themselves to a category that we know (and they know, by the end of the book) to be a shrinking category.

What happens when the child decides she does not want to be part of a shrinking category? Alice the character is what Kincaid calls the false child, the child who is adult-like and who has already decided that they want to grow up. This child has ostensibly already recognized that childhood is a shrinking space and has conceded it to adults. But there is a problem with this reaction, and that is this behavior is too overt. As Nodelman notices, adults want children to still pretend to be childish, and Alice's blatant attempts to imitate adults (such as boxing her own ears) might be unsettling to an adult implied reader. If a child like Alice finds the shrinking space of adult-defined childishness too confining, like she finds the White Rabbit's house too cramped and uncomfortable when she grows very large, it does not matter. The adult implied reader does not want her to eat the little cakes and escape.

The adult implied reader is not the only one who wants to secure Alice in the bounds of childhood. Wonderland tries to convince Alice that being childlike is much more freeing (although Nodelman points out the freedom adults offer children is only illusory). In

Wonderland, Alice meets many characters and problems that are only accessed or solved by being "childlike" (and thus shunning attempts at imitating adults). For instance, Alice can only relate to the animals in Wonderland if she gives up her knowledge from adults and fulfills the role given to her: be a child and play along with the Mock Turtle's lessons. If anything, Alice's adult-acquired knowledge is always failing her: it is not polite to talk about a mouse's murder to his face, and not all seas are by the train. The adult implied audience may find this Alice's mistakes comical and alluring, while the child implied audience may use Alice's mistakes to learn how to act comical and alluring (by acting ignorant).

Alice is put in her place in Wonderland. Wonderland shows her she is not an adult, and she should not try to be one. If she tries to use grand adult words like Latitude and Longitude, she will only end up misusing them. The failure of Alice's attempts to be an adult is most evident in the riddles Wonderland poses. But Alice's knowledge does not just fail her. Carrol cheats. When it comes to puzzle-solving in Wonderland, Carroll is the play master. He can change the rules whenever he likes. After all, that door was not there before, and neither was the bottle.[16] The puzzles in Wonderland deeply affect Alice's emotions and anxieties; she becomes so demoralized about getting into the beautiful garden that she cries an ocean of tears. Alice's sometimes hopeless attempts to solve riddles in Wonderland imitate the uncanny feeling of being trapped or helpless that Freud describes. In Wonderland, this is used as a threat. In fact, Wonderland seems to represent in part the world of adults: the White Rabbit is old, the Queen and her courtiers all imitate adults, and everyone in Wonderland bosses Alice around like she is a child.[17] Alice is brutally being reminded that in the mad world of Wonderland, like the world of

[16] "There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table, half hoping she might find another key on it, or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes: this time she found a little bottle on it, (ʻwhich certainly was not here before,' said Alice,)" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 12).

[17] "ʻI never was so ordered about before in all my life, never!'" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 77).

adults that she so desires, she does not make the rules. Her knowledge—no matter how many books she has read that say do not drink bottles marked poison—will ultimately fail her. In fact, it might be better to accept her position as a child and stop trying to outsmart the adults.

Alice's knowledge is constantly failing her, and she trusts it too much. One of the most common mistakes she makes in Wonderland is trusting language implicitly, when in fact the characters in Wonderland are so eager to twist their words. Humpty Dumpty tells Alice "glory" can mean whatever he wants it to, and the Caterpillar uses "temper" in a way that Alice clearly misunderstands. Language is something that even adults struggle with, as Jacques Derrida examines in *On Grammatology*, and Alice is far outmatched in Wonderland. Carroll's riddles in the *Alice* stories are perhaps the most explicit intimidation tactic to the child reader. AHow does a child win at a game whose rules are always changing (such as the croquet game Alice plays, where she can only acknowledge the Queen's power if she wants to keep her head)? The only way out might be to stop playing at all, but if the implied child reader does want to play, she must concede to a place of secondary power.

The space children occupy in children's books is a shrinking space of power second to adults and continually losing ground to adulthood. "Wonderland's situations utopize lack of knowledge and constant questioning" (Nodelman, 40:), imitating the ignorance that adults might prefer children to feign. The child's favorite question (or is it?) "why?" is to be prioritized in Alice's behavior, because she encounters so many things in Wonderland that have never happened to her before. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* makes adulthood fundamentally unattainable for Alice. No matter how hard she tries, she must always ask 'why' and her knowledge will fail her.

Perhaps it is futile to try to be an adult at all, at least if you are a child, like Alice. The *Alice* stories seem to try to convince Alice into performing the alluring childlike role adults prefer her in by arguing to her that the role of child is not shrinking, at least not in this book. Instead of encouraging Alice to grow, the story postulates that she might leave off it at seven.[18] If she leaves off with her adult-acquired knowledge and stops talking about Dinah eating mice, Wonderland might leave off its hostility and the mouse might swim back.

This is all a farce. Wonderland is just offering Alice more adult knowledge in a differently labelled package. Wonderland is teaching Alice how to be childlike. It does this by making the puzzles that would be uncanny to an implied child reader and narratee, since some of the riddles are simply out of a typical child reader's knowledge base (such as the mathematics problems Carroll embeds in his stories), and the child is left with the uncanny feeling of helplessness. Any implied child reader who overhears the shadow texts Nodelman notices (Butte calls this crosswriting in "The Ricochet Effect") which address the adult implied reader in the *Alice* stories will understand that they do not understand everything. For example, the narratorial explanation, "Her first idea was that she had somehow fallen into the sea, "and in that case I can go back by railway," she said to herself. (Alice had been to the seaside once in her life, and had come to the general conclusion, that wherever you go to on the English coast you find a number of bathing machines in the sea, some children digging in the sand with wooden spades, then a row of lodging houses, and behind them a railway station.)" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 19), will inform any eavesdropping implied child reader that Alice is naive. Eventually, as a result of this crosswriting and intimidation tactics from adults that Nodelman sees, the *Alice*

[18] "'Seven years and six months!' Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. 'An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked *my* advice, I'd have said "Leave off at seven"— but it's too late now.'" (Through the Looking Glass, 79).

stories seem to function as a demand from the adult implied reader to the child implied reader to pretend to be childlike.

Ultimately, this will soothe the adult implied audience, as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* outline in the final chapter. Here we meet Alice's older sister, and her thoughts on Wonderland. In the last paragraph of the book, we overhear the adult sister's thoughts about Alice the child:

> Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would 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: and how she would 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 (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 192).

The sister's thoughts outline the space for Alice which adults believe to best soothe the adult's fear of the uncanny that is childhood. Childishness includes "simple sorrows" and "simple joys." It means bright and eager eyes and simple and loving hearts. The word "simple" is appears liberally in the above passage. The child is eager to learn (but not too knowledgeable) and ignorant, always ready to learn from the now adult Alice (and here little Alice is once and for all just an adult in the making). At the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it is ultimately the implied adult audience whose anxieties are soothed, and this above all shows how if the adult and her anxieties come first in children's literature, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is no exception.

Alice's sisters' thoughts about Alice the child exemplify Rose's statements about adults' relationships to children, especially in children's literature. Rose notes that adults diffuse a perceived threat in children by forcing children into a dialogue in which they are simply unformed adults—they would like to think that children are on their way to become adults, and the process is linear (Rose, 13). Alice's sister soothes herself by assuring herself that Alice the child is simply an adult in the making; this, according to Rose, is the least threatening position the sister as an adult would believe Alice could occupy.

What is threatening about children if they are not simply adults-in-the-making? Children's literature is a demonstration of adults' grapple with trauma (Rose, 14). Rose notes that adults need children's literature to perform certain roles in order to soothe adult's fragmented selves, in particular their fragile sexual identity. Adults need to tell themselves that their own childhood was a linear, non-fractured journey. They need to believe that they 'grew out' of their child self, and that out of the process, they emerged whole. But Rose argues "The most crucial aspect of psychoanalysis for discussing children's fiction is its insistence that childhood is something in which we continue to be implicated and which is never simply left behind" (Rose, 12). It is not a linear process. But adults would like to think it is. We can watch adults attempting to dodge and diffuse the fear that childhood is contiual in children's literature —even by the fact that adults have placed children's literature in a separate category from adult literature. But the claim that child is a different category than adult is an evasion. Rose traces this from Freud:

> Childhood amnesia or partial recollection of childhood has nothing to do with a gradual cohering of the mind as we get older and our ability to remember improves. Instead it reveals that there are aspects of our childhood which one part of our mind, a part over which we precisely do not have control, would rather forget. (Rose, 13)

For Freud, childhood is always present, not grown out of. Thus, childhood becomes a "threat to the idea that we have neatly picked up and resolved everything" (Rose, 14). What is fragmented? Most of all, Rose notes that adult sexuality is fragmented. Adults have placed child sexuality as subordinate to adult sexuality where one grows into the other. This is done to avoid the fact that adults' own conception of our sexuality is "at best precarious, and never complete" (Rose, 14).

In children's literature, we see the adult space portrayed as a complete space—non-fragmented—and a space that they tell themselves children must grow into. We answer questions about identity "*for* the child at the cost of deceiving ourselves" (Rose, 16).

Alice can never have an identity that is anything but subordinate to her adult sister's. In the sister's mind, Alice can *never* grow up. Alice "would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood" (Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 192). Alice never grows up—not during the novels, and not ever in the future.

James Kincaid notes that Alice remaining always a child apportions her an element of desire for adult readers—it is exactly because she is declining invitations, playing tag with the implied adult reader and never being caught, that she remains attractive to real adult readers. If Rose believes that children's literature tries to relegate children to a subordinate position to soothe adults about their doubts about the wholeness of their identity, then Alice the character performs this act permanently. Barrie's Peter Pan may be the boy who never grows up, but Alice is the little girl who never grows up. Kincaid argues adults would prefer her that way. Alice acts as a permanent avowal from adults to themselves (with children overhearing) that she and the little girls she represents will remain in a safe—for adults—cage outlined for her by Wonderland, forever.

Alice's attempts to grow up and have an adult ability to solve riddles are constantly thwarted. Not only is she thwarted, but Carroll cheats. While Alice the character is constantly discombobulated and confused, the adult implied reader may feel soothed that Alice has been thwarted and will not threaten his space as an adult. An implied reader who understands the mathematics problems embedded in Carroll's stories might even congratulate himself at his understanding what Alice does not. Alice is, as Rose notes in children's literature, no challenge to adults (Rose, 20).

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