***Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland***

***Chapter 3***

***Summary:***

Having climbed out of the lake of tears, the animals are all dripping wet, with fur and feathers sticking close to their bodies. Irritable and cold, they want first to get dry again. After a short argument between Alice and the Lory, the mouse decides to take charge, and to dry everyone out by telling them all a story that he claims is the "driest thing I know." His story turns out to be a long-winded history of William the Conqueror's ascension to the crown, a story that is often interrupted by the impatient animals. When Alice admits she is getting no drier, the Dodo requests, in a pompous speech, that the meeting adjourn in favor of more strenuous measures. The animals have trouble with his pretentious vocabulary, especially the Eaglet, who asks him to speak English. When the Dodo suggests a caucus-race to get them all warm, they have no other ideas so they all go along with it without even knowing what a caucus-race might be.

A course is marked out, and the animals are placed at various starting points. There is no signal when to begin, instead they all start running whenever they like, stopping when they like, until someone announces the end of the race. Immediately the eager animals demand to know who won. The dodo, after some thought, decides that all had won and that all must have prizes, to be gotten from Alice, naturally. In her pockets, Alice only had a box of 'comfits' (a sort of candy which she hands around to everyone, and a little thimble. The thimble is solemnly presented back to her by the Dodo, with a serious speech. The birds choke down the candies awkwardly, and then they all ask the mouse to tell his sad story of hating cats and dogs.

"Mine is a long and sad tale," says the mouse, and this confuses Alice so that she could only think of how the mouse's tail was indeed long, but couldn't see why it was sad. The mouse's story is presented in the text in the form of a zigzag, shaped like an animal tail, to complete the pun. More puns follow one after another until the mouse walks away in disgust. Alice brags that Dinah would soon fetch it back if she were here. When she explains to the curious birds who Dinah is, and how well she catches birds as well as mice, the creatures all leave the scene rather quickly on various pretexts. Feeling misunderstood and abandoned, the homesick Alice loses herself in her tears again. A moment later, she hears footsteps.

***Analysis:***

This portion of the tale relies largely on puns, such a telling a dry (boring) tale in order to dry off. Such confusions between language and reality are Carroll's specialty.

The word 'caucus' means any gathering of the members of a political party or movement. The absurd "caucus race" with its erratic progress, mass participation, and air of disorganization, apparently is meant to mock the political process by which candidates are chosen to run for election.

Inverting, reversing or ignoring the rules of any game or procedure is another of Carroll's favorite themes. So, the race has no beginning or ending, no finish line, and no single winner. Everyone runs and wins. Everyone has a "prize" which is relatively worthless. The whole procedure becomes so nonsensical that it takes on another kind of sense or character altogether.

At this point in the tale, Alice is still a girl who cries easily, becomes homesick, and has trouble accepting that the creatures of wonderland do not always understand her, treat her politely, or cater to her needs. She will grow out of this vulnerable state as the story progresses, becoming a stronger, more-confident child.

***Detailed Summary and Analysis:***

The Caucus race provides a thinly veiled critique of the absurdity of English politics at the turn of the century while making a larger comment about the general meaninglessness of life. The animals run randomly in circles, progress nowhere, and arbitrarily adjourn without any clear conclusion. Carroll implies that politicians do the same, behaving with a great deal of pomp and circumstance without actually accomplishing anything. On a broader scale, the caucus race seems to imply that there may not be a clear purpose and meaning to life itself. Though the race accomplishes the intended purpose of getting everyone dry, they do not follow a clear path or understand what they are doing as they do it. This may be a broader commentary on the fact that life takes unexpected and sometimes arbitrary twists and turns but ultimately ends up in the right place even though there may not be a clear purpose. There is a great deal of confusion about words and their meanings in this chapter, showing the ways that Wonderland distorts language. When Alice mistakes the Mouse’s “tale” for its “tail,” visualizing the former in the shape of the latter, her inability to understand the inhabitants of Wonderland emerges. The purpose of language is to convey meaning, which requires words to have fixed definitions in order to consistently convey meaning. In Wonderland, language, as well as characters, events, and terrains, change meaning and significance from moment to moment. Each aspect of Wonderland has no lasting impact outside of the scene and the context in which it operates. As a result, there are no consistent patterns of meaning that would create a system of logic in Wonderland that might allow a visitor such as Alice to make sense of her surroundings. Alice’s verbal miscues with the Mouse are one example of her inability to understand patterns of behavior and thus establish any kind of expectation of what to anticipate in Wonderland. "How to dry off" is the central concern at the beginning of this chapter. Alice finds herself embroiled in a heated discussion with the Lory (the parrot) over who knows best how to dry off. The Lory cuts off the argument with the declaration that he is wiser than Alice because he is older than she is. In this dispute Alice becomes a child again — therefore sort of an underdog — but her self-centered emotions indicate a mental maturity well beyond her chronological age. Still, in relation to the other animals, Alice seems altogether like the dependent child that she really is; but clearly the Lory's rude position reflects that although he may be more mature, we don't know that he is necessarily older than Alice. In any case, Alice will not let the Lory's response go unchallenged, and the scene turns hilarious when the Lory absolutely refuses to reveal his true age.

All along, the Mouse has seemed to assume himself to be the natural "authority figure" of this motley group, so he offers "to dry" the creatures by telling them a dry history. The Mouse states that ". . . the Patriotic Archbishop of Canterbury found it advisable . . ." but before he finishes, the Duck interrupts: "Found what?"

"Found it," the Mouse replies rather crossly adding, "Of course you know what it means."

Wonderland certainly demands a strange "consistency" (one can't say 'logic') of its own — especially concerning language, for like the Eaglet's "Speak English!" the language of ordinary discourse is ambiguous. The Mouse's "it" could, of course, mean absolutely anything. At any rate, the dull, dry history of England does not help "dry" anyone. So the Dodo (an extinct bird) proposes a Caucus-race. Alice asks the Dodo to explain the Caucus-race, and he replies that "the best way to explain it is to do it." The Eaglet challenges him to "Speak English!" Thus, the Dodo explains that he is proposing that the creatures dry themselves in a race in which everyone starts and stops running when and where they please, and all win the race. For an extinct creature, the Dodo has a curious sport: Natural selection, the cause of his extinction, is a race in which only the best win.

Alice thinks that the Caucus-race is absurd, but she participates in the running anyway. As an indication that the other animals recognize her superiority, she is selected to bestow the prizes (comfits, or candy, from her pockets). After the candy is distributed, however, she remains without a prize. The Dodo then suggests that she be rewarded with the only thing left in her pocket, an elegant thimble, which he gives to her as her prize.

The Caucus-race, of course, satirizes all political caucuses and the wheeling and dealing of politics in which, to win an election, a politician often has to ensure that even his opponents feel that they all have won something with the victor's win. Certainly a prize to everyone does lessen the rise of jealousies and rivalries, but Alice wants to laugh, and the gravity of the other creatures intimidates her. Her amusement reflects a Victorian Tory of the nineteenth century; political progress at that time was essentially random and circular, a sentiment best summarized in the French saying: Plus ca change, plus c'est la même chose (or in English: the more things change, the more they stay the same).

Having discovered that the Mouse has bitter memories of his enemies, Alice asks him to tell the history he promised. But rather than a personal autobiography, however, the Mouse's story is a genetic-racial memory. On the printed page, his "tale" resembles a sprawling, elongated (and the print becomes tinier and tinier) mouse's tail. It is a brutal story of an encounter between a mouse and a dog ("Fury") in a house. The story ends with the dog executing the mouse after a trial. The Mouse's sad tale prefigures the entire plot of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, for Alice will finally dispose of all of Wonderland because of her anger at the injustice of the Knave of Hearts' trial.

The calligrammatic tale/tail teaches Alice nothing about the Mouse's past experiences, so after the Mouse departs in a rage, Alice goofs again. This time, she offends the Canary and the Magpie by describing Dinah's appetite for birds. Leaving her judgment about "what is safe to talk about" in limbo, she abandons her basic sensitivity; it simply can't be trusted here in this strange world of Wonderland. Her existence here is certainly becoming "curiouser and curiouser" because she cannot identify with the other creatures and their natures. On the other hand, her subversive (so the creatures think) attempt at communication is collapsing into mad, slapstick kinds of verbal play. Not only does Wonderland's language have a false logic, but the very definition of terms rests upon inconsistencies. In fact, so consistent are the illogicalities that nonsense appears to be the "norm" and the basis of Wonderland.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

The animals assemble on the bank and wonder how they will ever get dry. [The Mouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) makes a dry speech about William the Conqueror, but they all remain as wet as ever. So [the Dodo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) suggests they have a Caucus-race. [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice), recognizing that the Dodo expects someone to say something in response, asks what a Caucus-race is, but apparently the best way to learn is to do, so the Dodo marks out an almost-circular race track. On the count of three, everybody starts running, however they like, for however long. The Dodo stops the race after about half an hour and considers who has won.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The animals have conflated the two meanings of the word “dry,” and the mouse tries to physically dry them by giving a boring, or “dry,” speech. The Dodo and the caucus-race are parodies of politics, as Carroll seems to suggest that the Dodo resembles a proud and ceremonious politician but the actual race is a jumble of animals running without direction and purpose and without any real effect, that is then treated as if it did have a purpose or “winner.”

***Summary part2***

After a great deal of thought, [the Dodo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) announces that everybody has won and that [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) must give the prizes. Alice looks in her pocket and luckily finds a box of sweets and hands them around. The animals insist that she must also have a prize but all she has left is a thimble. The Dodo takes it and presents it ceremoniously to Alice. Alice bows in return, trying not to laugh at the Dodo’s solemnity. The animals attempt to eat their sweets with great difficulty.

***Analysis part 2:***

Yet the winners turn out to be all of them because there is not criteria for judging anything, and the prizes are meager. And yet all of this ridiculousness is treated by the animals as being of great importance. They seem unable to understand the substance of things, focusing solely on the importance of surface actions (which isn’t a bad description of a lot of adult life, frankly). Alice has become the authority – she is like the adult in a room of children, and she is given a great deal of solemn respect by them all – they approach her humble candies as if they are delicacies. Alice is in her own category of person, neither child nor adult.

***Summary part 3***

Then, [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) urges [the Mouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) to tell her his story. It is a sad tale, says the Mouse, which confuses Alice, thinking he is talking about his tail. The Mouse ignores her and goes on with the story, a rhyming tale about a judge-like feline character called Fury who puts a Mouse on trial. Part-way through, the Mouse stops to shout at Alice for not listening. The pair argues, and the Mouse, thinking Alice is talking nonsense, storms off. Alice and the animals call him back but he is too upset.

***Analysis part 3:***

The Mouse’s story foreshadows later events at the Queen’s court of law, as a court of law in which a mouse is put on trial by a cat certainly isn’t going to provide true, fair justice. Issues of language continue to arise, making it difficult for Alice and the animals to communicate. Yet the Mouse’s anger at not being listened indicates just how important it is to people (or talking mice) to feel listened to.

***Summary part 4:***

They all wish [the Mouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) would come back. [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) misses [Dinah](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) the cat again – she thinks Dinah could easily bring the Mouse back to finish its story. One of the birds in the group wonders who Dinah is, and Alice excitedly describes the talented, bird-catching cat, which causes the birds in the group to make excuses and hurry off until Alice is left quite alone, thinking sadly of her beloved pet. She hears little feet approaching and hopes it is the Mouse.

***Analysis part 4:***

Alice continues to see the entire world through her own feelings—which is typical of a child. She believes that because she loves her cat, everyone will love her cat. It doesn’t occur to her that Dinah certainly would bring back the Mouse—probably in her mouth—or that a bunch of birds might be made uncomfortable by her friendship with a bird-catching cat. It’s worth noting, too, that Dinah certainly doesn’t just catch birds—she kills them. There is a specter of death here that doesn’t occur to Alice, but certainly does to the animals.

***Important Quotations***

***Quotation 1:***

"In that case," said the Dodo solemnly, rising to its feet, "I move that the meeting adjourn, for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies – "  
  
"Speak English!" said the Eaglet. "I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and, what's more, I don't believe you do either!" (Wonderland 3.14-15)

***Explanation:***

The Eaglet objects to making language too complicated; there's no need, after all, to put obstacles in the way of understanding one another. The Dodo, Lewis Carroll's own self-parody (a play on the way he would stutter his real name "Do-Do-Dodgson"), likes using flowery language and fancy words, but this really isn't necessary for his audience of child readers.

***Quotation 2:***

"You are not attending!" said the Mouse to Alice, severely. "What are you thinking of?"  
  
"I beg your pardon," said Alice very humbly: "you had got to the fifth bend, I think?"  
  
"I had not!" cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily.  
  
"A knot!" said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her "Oh, do let me help to undo it!" (Wonderland 3.34-37)

***Explanation:***

Before the "Who's on First?" sketch, there were the Alice books. In each line, a new misinterpretation (usually totally illogical) interferes with the communication between characters. Alice's confusion of the homophones "tale" / "tail" and "knot" / "not" is behind this comedic exchange. (Take a look at Chapter 3 to see the Mouse's "tale" pictured as a concrete poem "tail.")

***Quotation 3:***

Indeed, she had quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say "I'm 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. (Wonderland 3.2)

***Explanation:***

This is still a common argument of parents and older siblings – "I'm older than you, so I know better." But in this case, it's obvious that the Lory (a parody of real-life Alice Liddell's older sister Lorina) has just run out of good arguments, so it resorts to this lame one instead. In Wonderland, older does not mean wiser – sometimes it's exactly the opposite!

***Quotation 4:***

First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle . . . and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no "One, two, three, and away!", but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out "The race is over!", and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking "But who has won?"  
  
This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it stood for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him), while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes." (Wonderland 3.19-20).

***Explanation:***

The "Caucus-race" is the most strongly satirical element in the Alice books. The narrator exposes the absurdity of political machinations, which are a race that has no clear beginning or ending and gets everybody precisely nowhere.