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

***Chapter 5***

***Summary:***

The caterpillar looks at Alice and asks sleepily, "Who are YOU?" to which Alice replies she no longer really knows anymore, after all the recent changes. She tells him how confusing it can be to change size many times in one day, but the caterpillar simply disagrees, and maintains that even changing into a butterfly would feel in the least odd for him. Their conversation proceeds with difficulty, since the Caterpillar speaks only in terse, logical sentences and is rather unfriendly. Alice maintains that she is changing, and doesn't remember things as she used to. To prove this, she tries reciting a famous poem ("How Does the Little Busy Bee"); however, it comes out just as wrongly as the verses in wonderland tend to do, and is full of nonsense and malicious humor.

The Caterpillar asks her what height she would prefer to be. Definitely larger than a paltry three inches, Alice replies, before noticing that her new acquaintance is exactly that same height. He tells her she'll get used to it, and resumes smoking. A moment later he leaves his perch to crawl away, noting as he departs that one side will enlarge her and the other side will shrink her. Alice wonders, "Of what?" To her unspoken question comes the answer, "Of the mushroom."

Not knowing how to find two different sides of a round object, Alice finally reaches as far around as she can with both hands. The mushroom has a dramatic effect, and soon Alice's head is far up in the uppermost tree branches. Her neck is long and flexible, allowing her to swoop and dive amongst the leaves. As she does so, she alarms a hostile pigeon which flies into her face screaming, "Serpent!" Alice denies she is a serpent, but fails to convince the pigeon, who is mortally afraid of egg-eating serpents and has tried every hiding place to escape them. Alice denies being a serpent, but confesses to a liking for eggs, which is normal in little girls. The pigeon responds that girls must be a type of serpent, if that is the case. Alice denies wanting the pigeon's eggs, as they are still raw, and manages to escape further confrontation with the pigeon by nibbling her way down to her original normal size. No sooner has she done so, than she discovers a tiny house about four feet high. Deciding to go in it, she shrinks herself down to nine inches.

***Analysis:***

The tale continues with the theme of transformation, in particular by placing Alice in a dialogue with a creature that symbolizes metamorphosis, the change from one state to another. Ironically, however, the caterpillar seems to have no sympathy for Alice's complaint about constantly changing size. He finds nothing confusing about changes in one's body, perhaps because it is his very essence to undergo radical changes.

Alice faces several logical puzzles in this chapter. When she learns that one side of the mushroom will make her taller, the other side shorter, she must figure out how to determine 'sides' of a round object. It's difficult for ordinary reasoning to accept that the same object can have two entirely opposite effects, and even more difficult to accept that the sides chosen can be arbitrarily determined. Yet instead of sitting down and crying, Alice learns to play along with the bizarre logic and laws at work in her new environment, and so she successfully determines the sides herself. One is not so surprised that her method works, for one of the rules in wonderland seems to be that very strict adherence to pure logic leads to correct results; after all, the only requirement stated was that Alice nibble from two separate sides of the round mushroom, which she did.

The pigeon encounter further demonstrates the severe, disorienting changes Alice is facing. In addition, it poses the question of definitions and categories. If the pigeon means by 'serpent' anything that eats an egg, is she mistaken? Do meanings reside in the intention of the person speaking, or are they objective, grounded in the things and objects themselves. This deeply philosophical question pervades the book, as one see also in the meeting with the Mad Hatter.

***Detailed Summary***

Alice comes across a Caterpillar that is resting on top of a giant mushroom and smoking a hookah pipe. The two stare at each other in silence for a while before the Caterpillar asks Alice, “Who are you?” Alice has trouble explaining who she is to the antagonistic and contemptuous Caterpillar. Dejected, she turns to leave, but the Caterpillar calls her back to recite a poem. The Caterpillar duly notes that she recites the poem incorrectly and goes on to ask what size she would like to be. Alice states that being three inches tall is a wretched height, which insults the three-inch-tall Caterpillar. The Caterpillar crawls away in a huff, but not before telling Alice that eating one side of the mushroom will make her grow larger and eating the other side will make her grow smaller.

Alice tastes the right-hand portion of the mushroom and shrinks. She next tries part of the left-hand portion of the mushroom, and her neck grows so long that her head is above the treetops. Realizing she cannot get the other part of mushroom to her mouth, she attempts to reorient herself when a Pigeon attacks her. The Pigeon has mistaken Alice for a serpent who wants to eat its eggs. Alice assures the Pigeon that she is not a serpent, and the Pigeon skulks back to its nest, leaving Alice to nibble at the two pieces of the mushroom until she returns to her original height. Back at her proper size, Alice wanders around the forest looking for the garden when she encounters a four-foot-tall house. She decides to visit the house and eats the portion of the mushroom to reduce her size to nine inches tall.

***Detailed Analysis:***

When the Caterpillar asks Alice “Who are you,” she finds that she doesn’t know who she is anymore. The Caterpillar aggravates Alice’s uncertainty about her constantly changing size. The Caterpillar also may represent the threat of sexuality, as suggested by its phallic shape. Alice recognizes this threat when she calls attention to the Caterpillar’s impending bodily transformation, since caterpillars reach sexual maturity in butterfly form. Though she seeks guidance and compassion from the Caterpillar, she finds only further self doubt under its brusque scrutiny. Regardless, she defers to the Caterpillar’s authority, just as she did with the White Rabbit in the previous chapter. Alice’s confusion peaks when the Caterpillar seems to be able to read her thoughts, answering her unspoken question “just as if she had asked it aloud.” Her identity is so confused now that her thoughts no longer seem to be her own. Alice has trouble reciting the poem “Father William” and finds that her inability to remember things she knows well shows the effects of Wonderland on her brain. Though the Caterpillar is a denizen of Wonderland, he has some familiarity with the poem that Alice recites, and he demonstrates his knowledge by pointing out that she has it “wrong from beginning to end.” The poem “Father William” (also known as “The Old Man’s Comforts”), by Robert Southey, is a didactic poem about the importance of living in moderation, and many Victorian children were required to memorize it. The Caterpillar proposes that Alice recite the poem to gauge how much she has changed. Alice’s mutilation of the poem occurs as a result of Wonderland’s effect on her brain. The Caterpillar’s contemptuous authoritarian presence compounds her flustered state.

The Pigeon accuses Alice of being a serpent, which causes her to doubt not only who she is but also what she is. Estranged from her old self, Alice has trouble defending herself to the Pigeon. The Pigeon reasons that since Alice exhibits key traits of a serpent, having a long neck and eating eggs, she must in fact be a serpent. Alice becomes trapped in this logic so that she becomes identified by a single action and feature. The Pigeon threatens Alice’s already shaken assumption of a stable identity.

Alice is well acquainted by now with the prime principle of Wonderland's chaos: illogic. Yet she continues — almost by instinct — to oppose the illogical context in which she continually finds herself. Yet her experience so far should have prepared her for the possibility that the "pebble-cake" might not have reduced her size. But as eating cake had worked that way once before, she expected (logically) the same results. And, indeed, the cake produced the desired effect. Thus, it is the reader who is surprised!

Nothing has really changed, though. All of Alice's moral precepts — order, the idea and the use of logic, and precise language — have become turned upside-down; they are now either meaningless concepts, or cruel and twisted confusions for her. In her encounter with the blue Caterpillar, for example, the destruction of her identity and her belief in ordinary language, social manners, and human superiority to animals is intensified.

"Who are you?" the Caterpillar asks her. Alice replies in a negative, defensive, and tentative way: "I — I hardly know, Sir, just at present — at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

The way that Alice responds to the Caterpillar is as significant as what she says. Compared to the other creatures that she has met, the Caterpillar is downright nasty. For him, all conventions of social etiquette have been cast away. Alice's attempts to display respect and politeness — by addressing him as "Sir" — simply produce harsh derision and scorn. And he becomes even ruder — to the point of provocation. This is all becoming horribly frustrating! The conventions of social etiquette all seem to be working against Alice, and she has no recourse. She has no other set of standards or values. All of her training has conditioned her to simply bear impoliteness with politeness. It is not easy.

The crudity of the Caterpillar's first question is emphasized by the narrator's remark that such a question was not easy for Alice to answer. In the context of the dialogue, the narrator's voice reveals a wry touch of humor. But given what Alice has just been through, the haughty question is hardly a humorous one. The question "Who are you?" can be very hostile — especially when one is addressed by a blue Caterpillar. His cold and snide observations reduce Alice's feelings to a pathetic, suppressed anger. When he repeats his nasty question, she says in a grave, but exasperated voice: "I think you ought to tell me who you are first." In a devastating retort, the Caterpillar says: "Why?"

It is obvious that such an exchange imposes upon Alice simply more insecurity and feelings of guilt. Yet those kinds of feelings cannot be sustained for long; all too quickly they become hostile and negative. It is all Alice can do to contain her anger. The strength of her repressed feelings is a bit amusing to the reader. Her deliberate, determined restraint reveals the secret of much of the story's tension. Her self-control is remarkably exaggerated because Alice is a "proper little girl."

The Caterpillar's attitude has so frustrated her that Alice turns to leave him, but he pleads with her to come back, and after she reluctantly does, he says: "Keep your temper."

"Is that all?" asks Alice, more angry than ever.

The Caterpillar then further outrages her. He asks her how she thinks she has changed. Alice tells him that she can't remember things and that her size is always changing. Earlier, when she attempted to recite the very Victorian, very moralistic poem "How Doth the Little Busy Bee," for instance, "it all came different." In a deceptively simple form of mistranslation, Alice made a dutiful creature (the bee) become a slothful creature (a crocodile). The poem she mangles here is very much akin to what happened in Chapter II, for in that poem she kept saying: "How doth the little crocodile" — an animal who grins and eats little fish that swim into his mouth.

Carroll's parody of "proper" Victorian, didactic children's verses continues with the Caterpillar commanding her to recite "You Are Old, Father William." But the Father William poem comes out just as immoral and just as altered as the crocodile/bee poem. Each subject becomes the antithesis of the correct "moral" of the "correct verse." The Caterpillar tells Alice that her recitation is wrong because it is totally against the intent of "the true originals." Of course, it is — and that's what frustrates Alice so. Instead of being an old man of moderate pleasures, Father William is a lusty, scheming hedonist: He advises his son that the secret of longevity and health is an active, self-indulgent life — the very opposite of conventional wisdom on how to reach a ripe old, proper Victorian age.

At the conclusion of Alice's verse recital, the two mutually antagonistic temperaments move to a final clash. We almost see Alice gnashing her teeth in frustration as she tells the Caterpillar that she wishes she were larger than just three inches tall. Naturally, the Caterpillar is offended by the implication that there is something wrong with being three inches tall — since that is exactly his height when he is extended on his tail.

Thus, he explodes in anger and becomes viciously insulting. Then he abruptly crawls away in a huff. Once more, we are reminded of the unceasing antipathy between Alice and the creatures of Wonderland.

Oddly enough, in spite of the blue Caterpillar's anger, before he leaves Alice, he gives her the secret of realizing her wish. As he exits, he remarks: "One side [of the mushroom] will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter." Perplexed, Alice asks herself: "One side of what?" The clairvoyant Caterpillar says: "Of the mushroom" — just as if she had asked the question aloud. Note that neither Alice nor the Caterpillar acts as though this act of mind-reading is anything extraordinary. Each of them seems to accept mind-reading as a matter of course. Alice has obviously been so thoroughly exasperated by the bizarre shrinkages and physical distortions inflicted upon her throughout the day that the Caterpillar's mental feat no longer impresses her. If she can converse at all with a Caterpillar, his mind-reading can't be much more extraordinary. But, remember, the creatures of Wonderland never behave as though they are abnormal.

The mushroom has predictable effects. This time, it leaves Alice with a curving, serpentine neck. There is a curious irony at play here: The Caterpillar again provides Alice with the means of changing her size rather than simply, psychologically, "growing up." Caterpillars, of course, emerge from a chrysalis as newborn butterflies or moths; they die, so to speak, to be reborn. Alice, however, never experiences a similar metamorphosis. In fact, she resents any notion that she is anyone other than who she has always been.

A good case here can be made that part of her objection to "growing up" is based on her fear of losing her identity. So long as she remains young Alice, she is innocent of good and evil. But with her neck suddenly slithering through the tree branches, she appears to be the embodiment of evil. In fact, a pigeon-hen immediately thinks that Alice is an egg-eating snake.

Thus, the Pigeon's attack on Alice changes Wonderland from a pastoral garden to a primal jungle of violence and death. Alice denies that she is a serpent. "I — I'm a little girl," she says, remembering the number of changes she has gone through during the day. "A likely story indeed!" smirks the Pigeon.

Alice is again unable to triumph at the cost of an "adult." On the contrary, she feels compelled to assume a role as it is defined for her by others, and the Pigeon, once more, reinforces Alice's problem of identity. Like her series of size changes, Alice's entire existence is one gigantic question mark. Her problem is that she truly sympathizes with the Pigeon's desire to protect the nest. Nevertheless, Alice fears that she won't be able to prove that she is, truly, just a little girl with an extremely long neck. And the Pigeon rejects Alice's claim — especially after she admits that Yes, she has eaten eggs. But her protests that she has no designs on these particular eggs come to nothing, and the Pigeon vehemently orders her away from the nest.

In a state of rejection, Alice desperately tries to reduce herself back to her previous size. She still has some of the Caterpillar's mushroom, so she nibbles at pieces of it, and by a process of trial and error, she begins to be able to control her size. Thus, her success in using the mushroom to obtain the desired height shows how well she is beginning to apply the logic of size reversibility.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[The Caterpillar](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-caterpillar) lazily addresses [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice), by saying “Who are YOU?” Alice explains that she doesn’t know how to answer, having recently been so many different Alices. The Caterpillar won’t accept that as an answer, so she asks him shouldn’t he tell her who HE is first. The Caterpillar doesn’t see why.

***Analysis Part 1:***

This is a very significant question for Alice, disguised as a blasé inquiry from the sleepy creature. The Caterpillar cuts right to Alice’s main insecurity, her identity.

***Summary part2***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) turns away, but the [Caterpillar](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-caterpillar) calls her back and tells her he has something important to say. He tells her to keep her temper. Alice is starting to get very angry at this hypocritical creature, but she keeps her cool and waits for him to speak again. He takes his time, smoking the hookah leisurely before asking her about how she thinks she has changed. Alice says she can’t remember rhymes and things as she ought to. So the Caterpillar asks her to recite one called “You are old, Father William”. She recites the poem, but it is not quite right. The Caterpillar says it is completely wrong.

***Analysis part 2:***

The Caterpillar acts like a kind of wise man or teacher, but the advice he gives is off-topic and hypocritical, or involves making Alice give her thoughts rather than providing any real insight of his own. Alice’s mind continues to be as fluid and non-stable as her body.

***Summary part 3***

After another long pause, the [Caterpillar](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-caterpillar) wants to know what size [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) would like to be. Alice says she doesn’t have a particular preference and that it’s actually the constant changing between sizes that bothers her, but when pushed she says she would like to be bigger. The Caterpillar angrily suggests that three inches is the perfect size. But like many of Wonderland’s creatures the offence is as quick to fade, and he tells Alice that one side of the mushroom will make her [taller](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/symbols/eating-and-drinking-growing-and-shrinking) and one side will make her [smaller](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/symbols/eating-and-drinking-growing-and-shrinking). Then he mysteriously crawls away.

***Analysis part 3:***

Alice’s comment that it is the shifting of sizes rather than being either small or large that causes her the most trouble is an indication of how hard it can be to get a sense of yourself when you are undergoing change—such as growing up. The Caterpillar’s offense at Alice not wanting to be his size shows how prickly other people (or animals) can be about their identity.

***Summary part 4:***

Alice is left to examine the mushroom. Not knowing which side is which, she puts her arms around the mushroom’s trunk and grabs a piece with each hand and tries the first sample, but it makes her shrink even further – suddenly her head is touching her feet. So she gobbles down the other piece as fast as she can and feels her head become free of her feet. But it is her neck that is [growing](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/symbols/eating-and-drinking-growing-and-shrinking) rather than the whole of her, and soon she is looming like a giraffe over the mushroom. She can’t even see her shoulders and hands. But she finds that her neck is marvelously flexible, and she can swoop it down towards the foliage below.

***Analysis part 4:***

The bizarre dream world of Wonderland becomes even more bizarre as Alice nearly shrinks herself away and then sprouts into a kind of girl-giraffe.

***Summary Part 5:***

As [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) swoops, a pigeon flaps into her, calling her a serpent. She insists she isn’t a serpent, but the pigeon is chattering away, describing how it is impossible to please the serpents and everything he has tried has failed, and just as he thought he was free, one comes flying out of the sky. Alice apologizes, but tells the pigeon she is only a little girl (though she seems to hardly believe it herself). The pigeon doesn’t believe her, and is sure she is looking for eggs to eat. She says that girls do eat eggs but she isn’t looking for any and the pigeon, still quite confused, tells her to stop bothering him then.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Alice and the pigeon engage in a conversation about identity. Underlying that conversation is an argument about what makes up one’s identity. From the pigeon’s point of view, if you have a long swooping neck and like eggs then you are a serpent. Alice contends in contrast that she is a little girl, but has no way to explain why or how she is a little girl. Of course, Alice is right and the pigeon is wrong, but the exchange does point to the slipperiness of the categories we use to define ourselves to ourselves or others.

***Summary Part 6:***

Alice remembers the mushroom, and tries eating again. Bit by bit, she transforms herself into her old size and now sets out to find the [garden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/symbols/the-garden) as she’d planned. She comes to a tiny house instead and thinks she’ll go in, but not wanting to scare the owners, she eats some of the shrinking mushroom until she is nine inches high and approaches the house.

***Analysis Part 6:***

Alice is gaining control over her transformations. She now figures out how to eat little bits of each side of the mushroom and carefully controls her shrinking to get to where she wants to. She is approaching growing and shrinking more strategically.

***Important Quotations***

***Quotation 1:***

"Come, my head's free at last!" said Alice in a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment, when she found that her shoulders were nowhere to be found: all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her.  
  
"What can all that green stuff be?" said Alice. "And where have my shoulders got to? And oh, my poor hands, how is it I can't see you?" She was moving about, as she spoke, but no result seemed to follow, except a little shaking among the distant green leaves. (Wonderland 5.46-47)

***Explanation:***

In this scene, Alice is free and confined at the same time. Her head has grown above everything in the world, even the rest of her body, giving a new meaning to the phrase "head in the clouds." But instead of making her feel free and exhilarated, she just feels out of touch with herself.

***Quotation 2:***

"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.  
  
This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." (Wonderland 5.2-3)

***Explanation:***

Alice doesn't know who she is because she doesn't know where she is – and because she can't remember what she's been taught, in school or beyond.

***Quotation 3:***

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,  
"And your hair has become very white;  
And yet you incessantly stand on your head –  
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"  
  
"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,  
"I feared it might injure the brain;  
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,  
Why, I do it again and again." (Wonderland 5, "You are old, Father William")

***Explanation:***

"You are old, Father William" parodies a famous didactic poem of the time that children had to memorize in school. In Lewis Carroll's Wonderland version, a son continually questions his father's physical prowess and stamina, suggesting that his father is an old man and ought to behave like one. But as Father William explains, there's no reason for him to act especially serious, dignified, or fragile in his old age. In fact, he's younger at heart than his son.

***Quotation 4:***

"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." (Wonderland 5.62-63)

***Explanation:***

To Alice, a name describes what a thing is; to the Pigeon, a name describes what it does.