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

***Chapter 7***

***Summary:***

The Mad Hatter (a hat-maker), the March Hare (a large rabbit) and the sleeping Dormouse (a golden-colored mouse) are sharing tea at a large table when Alice comes upon them. Though plenty of places are laid at the table, they tell her there's no room for her. She sits down regardless and is offered some wine, which turns out to be nonexistent. The Hatter asks her a riddle, "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" and this sets the tone for the whole conversation, which continues mostly in riddles, inverted sentences, and logical puzzles. When Alice says she means what she says, and then adds that she says what she means, for example, the creatures attack her logic. "I see what I eat" is not the same as "I eat what I see," points out the Hare, who is concerned over the portions on the table.

The Hatter asks Alice what day it is and compares it to the time on his watch, which has apparently been damaged by the Hare's attempt to repair it with butter. Oddly, the watch tells only the day and not the time, this is because the time never changes from teatime, four o'clock. They ask Alice if she's solved the riddle, and confess that they themselves have no answer to it. Alice retorts that they shouldn't waste time with unanswerable riddles. This reference to Time leads to a bizarre and surreal discussion on the nature of Time. Time, claims the Hatter, is actually a person with whom it is important to keep on very good terms. "If you knew time as well as I do," says the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk of wasting IT. It's HIM." Moreover, they have actually quarreled with Time themselves, at one of the Queen's croquet games, and now it seems that Time always keeps the hour the same, out of spite. Therefore, the three sit perpetually at the tea table, moving places when their cups get dirty. When Alice logically asks what happens after they've made a full circle, the subject is abruptly changed.

They ask Alice, then the sleeping Dormouse, to tell a story. The rodent replies with a nonsensical tale about three sisters who lived at the bottom of a well, drinking only treacle which is an old-fashioned word for molasses. The girls' main activity is drawing, that is, drawing this liquid out of the well in spite of the fact that they are inside it. The more Alice tries to make sense of the story, the more it dissolves into puns and logical impossibilities. "But they were in the well," she objects. "So they were...well in" replies the Dormouse. The dormouse falls asleep as it continues the story, making it even less coherent.

Growing finally disgusted with the creatures' rudeness to her, Alice departs vowing never to return. She notices a tree with a small door in it, enters, and finds herself again in the hallway with the glass table. With the help of the size-altering mushroom pieces, she manages finally to gain access to the garden full of flowers and fountains.

***Analysis:***

As the Cheshire Cat warned, Alice is indeed in the realm of the mad when she walks into the Tea Party. Here time has apparently been suspended, puns abound, and logical meanings of sentences are taken apart. Time is not just suspended; it is an animate character who has willfully stopped, as if on strike. Yet the suspension of time passing happens only in the Tea Party's vicinity, which could explain why the people in the area are said to be crazy.

The entire episode is so full of puns and whimsy that it seems to refuse any interpretation, any moral or message. From a literary point of view, the language games, surreal characters, and absurdly playful dialogue take precedence over any sense, logic, or psychological meaning. Indeed, Carroll seems to be saying one does not need to have much of a 'message' or 'moral' to tell a terrific story.

When Alice discovers that Time is a person and not merely an abstract concept, she realizes that not only are social conventions inverted, but the very ordering principles of the universe are turned upside down. Not even time is reliable, as Alice learns that Time is not an abstract “it” but a specific “him.” An unruly, subjective personality replaces the indifferent mechanical precision associated with the concept of time. Time can punish those who have offended it, and Time has in fact punished the Mad Hatter by stopping still at six o’clock, trapping the Mad Hatter and March Hare in a perpetual teatime. The Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse must carry out an endless string of pointless conversations, which may reflect a child’s perception of what an actual English teatime was really like. Alice must adjust her own perceptions of time, since the Mad Hatter’s watch indicates that days are rushing by. However, the party has not moved past the month of March, the month during which the March Hare goes mad.

Though the tea party challenges Alice’s understanding of the fundamental concept of time, the Mad Hatter’s answerless riddle reaffirms Wonderland’s unusual sense of order. The riddle seems to have no answer and exists solely to perpetuate confusion and disorder. Some readers have suggested that the riddle does in fact have an answer: Edgar Allen Poe “wrote on” both the subject of a Raven and “wrote on” a physical writing desk. In Wonderland, chaos is the ruling principle, but a strange sense of order still exists. Though riddles need not have answers, language must retain some kind of logic. The Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse point out to Alice that saying what she means and meaning what she says are not the same thing. Alice has said that she cannot take “more” tea because she has not had any yet. However, as the Mad Hatter points out, Alice can indeed take “more” tea even though she has not had any, since “it’s very easy to take more than nothing.” The language games at the tea party underscore the inconsistency of Wonderland, but also imply that the ordering principles that govern Alice’s world are just as arbitrary.

***Detailed Summary***

Alice approaches a large table set under the tree outside the March Hare’s house and comes across the Mad Hatter and the March Hare taking tea. They rest their elbows on a sleeping Dormouse who sits between them. They tell Alice that there is no room for her at the table, but Alice sits anyway. The March Hare offers Alice wine, but there is none. Alice tells the March Hare that his conduct is uncivil, to which he rejoins that it was uncivil of her to sit down without being invited. The Mad Hatter enters the conversation, opining that Alice’s hair “wants cutting.” Alice admonishes his rudeness, but he ignores her scolding and responds with a riddle: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” Alice attempts to answer the riddle, which begins a big argument about semantics. After their argument, the tea party sits in silence until the Mad Hatter asks the March Hare the time. When he discovers that the March Hare’s watch, which measures the day of the month, is broken, the Mad Hatter becomes angry. He blames the March Hare for getting crumbs on the watch when the March Hare was spreading butter on it. The March Hare sullenly dips the watch in his tea, dejectedly remarking that “It was the best butter.”

Alice gives up on the riddle and becomes angry with the Mad Hatter when she discovers that he doesn’t know the answer either. She tells him he should not waste time asking riddles that have no answers. The Mad Hatter calmly explains that Time is a “him,” not an “it.” He goes on to recount how Time has been upset ever since the Queen of Hearts said the Mad Hatter was “murdering time” while he performed a song badly. Since then, Time has stayed fixed at six o’clock, which means that they exist in perpetual tea-time. Bored with this line of conversation, the March Hare states that he would like to hear a story, so they wake up the Dormouse. The Dormouse tells a story about three sisters who live in a treacle-well, eating and drawing treacle. Confused by the story, Alice interjects with so many questions that the Dormouse becomes insulted. Alice continues to ask questions until the Mad Hatter insults her and she storms off in disgust. As she walks, she looks back at the Mad Hatter and the March Hare as they attempt to stuff the Dormouse into a teapot.

In the wood, Alice encounters a tree with a door in it. She enters the door and finds herself back in the great hall. Alice goes back to the table with the key and uses the mushroom to grow to a size that she can reach the key, then to shrink back to the size that she can fit through the door. She goes through the door and at last arrives at the passageway to the garden.

***Detailed Analysis:***

Linguistic assaults are very much a part of the "polite bantering" in Wonderland. Often, traumatic and verbal violence seems just about to erupt all the time, breaking through the thin veneer of civilized behavior, but it rarely does. Alice reaches the March Hare's house in time for an outdoor tea-party. The tea-party turns out to be a very mad tea-party. In attendance are Alice, the March Hare, the Mad Hatter, and a Dormouse. All are indeed mad, except (perhaps) Alice and the sleepy Dormouse (who is only mad when he is awake). Alice has arrived just in time for tea, which is served at six o'clock. But it is always six o'clock, with no time to wash the dishes; thus, it is always tea time. In fact, the significant feature about this tea-party is that time has been frozen still. The idea of real, moving, passing time is non-existent.

The absense of time means that the Mad Tea-Party is trapped in a space without time. The world isn't turning, hands aren't moving around the clock, and the only "rotating" exists around the tea-party table. When the four have finished tea (although Alice gets none), they move to the next place-setting around the table. Dirty dishes accumulate, and there doesn't seem to be any substantive food. No one even seems to be taking tea. The Mad Hatter tells Alice that the Queen has accused him of murdering his friend Time; ever since the Mad Hatter and Time had a falling out, it has always been six o'clock. It's always tea time, and they have no time to wash the dishes between time for tea.

Alice typically does her best to cling to her own code of behavior (as always); she is still determined to "educate" the creatures to the rules of Victorian social etiquette. They protest her joining the party with cries of "No room! No room!" But Alice ignores them (she is larger now), and she sits down. The insanity of it all begins immediately when the March Hare offers her wine that doesn't exist. Alice complains, of course, about this lack of civility in offering her some nonexistent wine. The March Hare counters that she was very rude to invite herself to their party. Her rules of etiquette completely fail her here. These creatures once again turn upside down all her principles of decorum.

"Your hair wants cutting," the Mad Hatter interrupts her at one point.

"You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice says. "It's very rude."

Later, she violates her advice and impolitely interrupts the Mad Hatter. "Nobody asked your opinion," she says. "Who's making personal remarks now?" retorts the Mad Hatter.

Alice has been deflated and demoralized. The last above-ground rules of how to act and what to say seem to dissolve before her eyes. She cannot understand why they are acting this way!

Thus, the tea-party continues with endless cups of tea and a conversation of absolutely meaningless nonsense. Suddenly, the Mad Hatter asks Alice: "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

At first glance, the riddle makes no sense as a logical question. And even the answer that Carroll provides elsewhere (the raven produces a few notes, all very flat, and it is never put the wrong end front) is nonsense. Presumably there should always be answers to any questions; at least, there were answers above-ground.

The Mad Tea-Party conversation repeats this miscommunication pattern like all the other absurd conversations that Alice has had with Wonderland creatures in previous chapters. She delightfully explains: "I'm glad they've begun asking riddles — I believe I can guess that."

"Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?" asks the March Hare.

"Exactly so," says Alice.

"Then you should say what you mean," says the Hare.

Alice's confidence is shaken: "I do," she says, "at least — at least I mean what I say — that's the same thing you know."

But here, of course, Alice is speaking in the context of time's absence. There is no time. This is, even in Wonderland, "another world."

"Why," says the Hare, "you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!"' This is reverse logic — exactly right for Wonderland, but, of course, not correct above-ground.

Alice cannot make the creatures understand this, however, and finally she sighs. "I think you might do something better with time . . . than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers." To this, the Hatter replies: "If you knew Time as well as I do . . . you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him."

Time is thus suddenly personified and becomes the source of much punning and comic relief. Alice participates in this nonsense in all seriousness, saying that she has to "beat time" when she learns music, even though she has "perhaps" never spoken to "him."

"Ah! That accounts for it," says the Mad Hatter. "He won't stand beating!"

Then the Mad Hatter launches into a satirical parody of another, famous children's verse: "Twinkle, twinkle little bat!" The bat is not the shining star of the Victorian poem, but a repulsive and morbid symbol of the ugly course of events about to begin. The Mad Hatter explains that his fight with Time and accusation of murder happened the last time that he was reciting that verse. So the disaster with Time is closely related to the Mad Hatter's distortion of the nursery rhyme. Filling his version with bats and flying tea-trays, the Mad Hatter's rhyme increases the comic personification of Time. The Mad Hatter has animated the inanimate star as a bat and has made an inanimate object live.

The Mad Tea-Party is filled with atrocious puns in conversation. The pun is determined by the coincidence of two words that sound so alike that relevant information is muddled. And here the play on words is a way of freeing meaning from conventional definition. The Dormouse, for instance, tells a story about three sisters who lived in a treacle well and were learning to "draw" treacle (molasses). Alice asks: "But I don't understand. Where did they draw treacle from?"

"You can draw water out of a water-well," says the Mad Hatter, "so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well."

"But they were in the well," says Alice (very logically).

"Of course they were," says the Dormouse. "Well in."

The Dormouse's illogic continues to frustrate Alice. Playing on words that begin with the letter M, the Dormouse describes the sisters as drawing "all manner of things — everything that begins with an M such as mousetraps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness — you know you say things are 'much of a muchness' — did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness!"

Alice stammers, and the Hatter cries, "Then you shouldn't talk."

With that rude remark, Alice storms away in disgust. She has still not succeeded in getting any closer to the reality she seeks. At the tea-party, she has not even received any tea or food. Her serving has been only a bitter course of verbal abuse and semantic teasing. Muchness indeed! The creatures are self-centered, argumentative and rude; they have violated all of the conventions of conversation that Alice has been taught to practice. All of these creatures in Wonderland have compounded the pain of Alice's psychological loss of place and time with their nonsense and cruel teasing.

As she leaves the table, Alice notices the other two attempting to drown the Dormouse in the teapot. His ritualistic death is, at least, a seemingly logical consequence of the Mad Hatter's ominous verse and Alice's departure. The Dormouse should have been hibernating instead of attending parties and telling anecdotes; dunking him seems to be sort of a realistic — if an absurd — way of forcing him back to "slumber." This will be, however, if they are successful, more than just a "slumber"; it will be death, "much of a muchness."

The Dormouse's fate serves as an appropriate conclusion to this chapter, for Alice enters another door and finds herself once again in the hallway with the glass table and the small doorway that leads to the beautiful garden. To try and reinforce the notion that Wonderland must have a hidden order, Alice first unlocks the door, and she then reduces her size by nibbling on a piece of the mushroom.

She has finally learned a lesson from her initial, frightening experience in Wonderland: She has been eating, drinking, and changing sizes, without thinking first.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

Outside the house, a long table is set out on the grass, and three creatures, a [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters), a [Hare](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) and a [Dormouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters), sit at one end, though as Alice approaches they insist there is no room for her. She sits down at the other end. The March Hare offers her a glass of wine, but she sees there is no wine and tells the hare off for being uncivil. It is Alice who has been uncivil by sitting down without an invitation, responds the Hare.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Again the novella puts Alice into a scene that in the real world would require a certain kind of etiquette—or the following of rules—and then has the creatures follow completely different, arbitrary rules while at the same time insisting on the importance of those rules. By doing so, Carroll is able to both generate humor and subtly question the value of the real world etiquette—why is it the way it is rather than another way?

***Summary part2***

They go on trading insults until the [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) speaks up and asks “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) is very glad to be given a riddle and is confident she can guess it. The Hatter thinks that “guessing” is not at all the same as “finding out the answer” and tells her off for not saying what she means, and the others join in berating her until they forget the riddle altogether.

***Analysis part 2:***

The Mad Hatter’s riddle isn’t really answerable, and by being unanswerable it gives the Mad Hatter a kind of authority because one would naturally assume that he can answer it. Of course, in fact he can’t, which makes it not really a riddle. At the same time, the Mad Hatter berates Alice for saying “guess” when she means “find out the answer” because one could guess without being able to or having any intention of finding out the answer. The Mad Hatter is here insisting that Alice must be precise with her meaning, while not holding himself at all to the same standard. This is something that characters in Wonderland do all the time, as do people in the real world.

***Summary part 3***

Then the [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) gets out his pocket watch and asks [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) what day it is. The watch is two days off. He blames the [Hare](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) for putting butter in it. Alice is fascinated by the Hatter’s watch, which tells the month and not the hour. The Hatter thinks it is just as reasonable as Alice’s watch and argues with her nonsensically. Meanwhile the [Dormouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) has fallen asleep. Alice pours a little tea on its nose to wake it up.

***Analysis part 3:***

The nature of time is put up for debate in this strange place. To Alice, who has learned to accept the conventions of time and time-keeping that she has learned above ground, the Hatter’s refusal to think of time so objectively is a further sign of his madness. And yet, what if we had twice as many minutes in a day that were all 30 seconds long? Our measures are conventions that are somewhat arbitrary, and the novella continuously points out this truth.

***Summary part 4:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) remarks that they ought to do something better with their time than waste it on unanswerable riddles. At this the [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) becomes very indignant. Time is a Him, not an It, he says. Alice says that she knows about Time, because she beats it when she plays music. This upsets the Hatter greatly. It reminds him of a time at the [Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-queen-of-hearts)’s concert, when he had to sing “Twinkle, Twinkle, little Bat”, an almost-recognizable nursery rhyme, and the Queen ordered his head to be cut off for “murdering Time”. This was in March and the [Hare](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) has been mad ever since. Now it is always six o’clock, so they keep the tea things out and rotate places around the table because there’s never any time to wash up.

***Analysis part 4:***

The tea party has skirted some upsetting and dangerous territory with the Hatter’s madness and the Hare’s offensive comments to Alice, but now we also learn that the reason for the characters’ strange ritual of changing places every so often is because it is always six o’clock at their table ever since the March Hare went mad. This suggests to Alice that time can be subjective, it can appear differently to different people. Put bluntly: what Alice considered to be perhaps the most universal thing in the world is not necessarily universal –an illuminating lesson.

***Summary Part 5:***

[The Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) changes the subject and wants [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) to tell them a story. Alice nominates the [Dormouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) instead, not knowing a story to tell. The Hatter tells the Dormouse to hurry, before he is asleep again, and the Dormouse obliges, with a very hurried story about three sisters who live down a well. Alice is very interested by this story and wants to know what they live on and why they live in a well. The Dormouse answers “Treacle” to each of these questions. The well is a treacle-well.

***Analysis Part 5:***

We certainly know that Alice has plenty of stories to tell, having heard her tell stories in her own head and aloud already, so why does she say to the Hatter that she doesn’t know any? Perhaps it is due to Alice’s difficulty remembering rhymes that makes her want not to try. But she does respond like a good audience to the Doormouse’s story; but the Doormouse’s story lacks all the conventions of the story: plot, details, etc.

***Summary Part 6:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) begins to get impatient with this implausible story and the [Dormouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters)’s evasive answers. He says that the sisters were learning to draw in the well, things beginning with M, like “muchness”. Alice confesses that she has never seen a muchness, to which the [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) scolds her for talking. This is the last straw. Alice leaves the tea-party and wanders back through the forest. She soon comes to a tree with a door in the trunk. She goes in, and finds herself in the long hall again, finds the key and the tiny door, and this time, she has all she needs to get into the beautiful [garden](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/symbols/the-garden).

***Analysis Part 6:***

Alice wants the story to be a story, and tries to get the Doormouse to tell it as one, but the last straw occurs when the Doormouse uses a nonsense word to describe what people are doing and Alice gets scolded for talking when she wants to know what it is. Now, Alice has certainly been told not to do when someone is telling a story, but at the same time a person listening to a story has a reasonable expectation that the story has some comprehensible meaning in it. Alice keeps getting scolded for her behavior when she is simply reacting sensibly to their misbehavior. And now she stands up for herself and gets to the place she originally hoped to go: the garden.

***Important Quotations***

***Quotation 1:***

Once more she found herself in the long hall, and close to the little glass table. "Now, I'll manage better this time," she said to herself, and began by taking the little golden key, and unlocking the door that led into the garden. Then she set to work nibbling at the mushroom (she had kept a piece of it in her pocket) till she was about a foot high: then she walked down the little passage: and then – she found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright flower-beds and the cool fountains. (Wonderland 7.102)

***Explanation:***

Alice's escape from the hall into the garden is the result of a lot of trial and error, not to mention being in the right place, with the right things, at the right time. She's lucky enough to get a second chance at effecting her escape, and this time she's not going to squander it.

***Quotation 2:***

. . . she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse into the teapot. (Wonderland 7.99)

***Explanation:***

Alice's more philosophical dilemma about trying to escape from a world that seems to shrink around her is parodied by a series of scenes in which other characters are stuffed into tiny containers. Here we see the Dormouse getting put in the teapot – which real-life Victorian children used as makeshift cages for their hibernating pet mice. (The teapots were, of course, empty of tea at the time.)

***Quotation 3:***

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.  
  
"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least – at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know."  
  
"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!"  
  
"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like'!"  
  
"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, which seemed to be talking in its sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe'!" (Wonderland 7.15-19)

***Explanation:***

There is, of course, a grammatical lesson here: word order is crucial to meaning in the English language. (In other languages, sometimes it's less important or not important at all, such as the Latin that Alice's brother studies.) But beyond that, there's a reminder that little differences can cause huge misunderstandings. Communicating exactly what you mean to another person is far more difficult than it first appears.

***Quotation 4:***

"They were learning to draw," the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; "and they drew all manner of things – everything that begins with an M—"  
  
"Why with an M?" said Alice.  
  
"Why not?" said the March Hare.  
  
Alice was silent.  
  
The Dormouse had closed its eyes by this time, and was going off into a doze; but, on being pinched by the Hatter, it woke up again with a little shriek, and went on: " – that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness – you know you say things are "much of a muchness" – did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?" (Wonderland 7.91-95)

***Explanation:***

While the Dormouse lists things that can be drawn with varying success, Lewis Carroll makes his own "sketch" of something beginning with an "m" – madness.