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

***Chapter 9***

***Summary:***

The Duchess appears and acts quite friendly towards Alice, walking arm and arm with her and delivering all sorts of inappropriate and useless bits of wisdom, like, "love makes the world go round." Alice reminds the Duchess of her own earlier statement that it was minding one's own business made it go round. Alice finds that conversing with the Duchess, who tries to find a moral in every trivial word uttered, from flamingos to mustard, is quite unbearable. Fortunately, the Queen appears and orders the Duchess to leave or lose her head, whereupon the woman disappears. The Queen then takes Alice to visit an animal called the Mock Turtle. "I don't even know what a Mock Turtle is." "It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from," replies the Queen.

A fantastic mythical animal, the Gryphon, escorts Alice to see the Mock Turtle, comforting Alice along the way by informing her that the Queen never really executes anyone. They arrive to find the Mock Turtle sitting alone, crying for no apparent reason. Once upon a time, the beast tells Alice, he was a real turtle rather than a mock one. He'd gone to school in the sea, where he studied all the 'extras' like French, Music, and Washing. Other subjects included the branches of math (ambition, distraction, uglification, derision), as well as Mystery (ancient and modern). The classics master taught Laughing and Grief. As for a schedule, the lessons grew 'less' from day to day, decreasing from ten hours the first day, nine the next, then eight, and so on. The eleventh was a holiday. Alice asks about the twelfth day and they change the subject, unable or unwilling to answer.

***Analysis:***

Both animals, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, are non-existent. Gryphons date from ancient mythology, where they are portrayed as winged lions. The other creature is Carroll's own invention, and is taken from a soup called "Mock Turtle" soup which does not, in fact, contain any turtle meat, hence the name "mock" turtle. The Queen's description of the Mock Turtle is circular and unhelpful for knowing anything about the animal, but it does further develop the theme of "self-referentiality" in the story. Self-referentiality happens whenever something usually meant to act upon, or point to, or indicate some other thing turns back upon itself instead. Self-referential statements can lead to paradoxes that are unsolvable, for example, the statement, "I am lying." If the person speaking is indeed lying then the statement is true. But if the person is not lying, then the statement contradicts his meaning. Further examples of self-referentiality are found in the book, for example in Chapter Eleven when the narrator tells the reader to look at the book's front cover, thereby referring to the book's physical form itself (which was obviously not yet in existence!)

The list of subjects mentioned by the Mock Turtle again twists the reader's ordinary perception and expectations into something familiar but disturbingly wrong. For example, instead of Latin and Greek, he studied "laughing and grief."

***Detailed Summary***

After the disappearance of the Cheshire Cat, the croquet game starts up again and the Duchess takes Alice’s arm. The two start to walk, and Alice becomes uncomfortable that the Duchess holds her so close. Alice thinks that the Duchess is behaving pleasantly because there isn’t any pepper present. The two walk and talk, and the Duchess takes every opportunity to explain various moral lessons to Alice. The Duchess attempts to put her hand around Alice’s waist, but Alice convinces her not to, telling her that the flamingo croquet mallet might bite. They run into the Queen, who sternly orders the Duchess off and asks Alice to resume the croquet game.

In little time, the Queen narrows the croquet game down to Alice, the King, and herself. All of the other players have been sent off for beheadings. With no soldiers remaining to act as arches, the Queen concludes the game and decides that Alice should visit the Mock Turtle. While the King pardons the condemned croquet players, the Queen brings Alice to the Gryphon, who leads her to the Mock Turtle. En route, the Gryphon explains to Alice that the Queen never actually executes anyone. Alice meets the Mock Turtle and immediately becomes concerned since he looks so sad. The Gryphon shows no sympathy for the Mock Turtle, explaining to Alice that he only fancies himself as being sad.

Amid constant sobbing, the Mock Turtle begins his tale by explaining that he used to be a real turtle. He went to sea school every day, and his master was an old turtle named Tortoise. Alice interrupts, asking why the teacher would go by the name of “Tortoise” if he wasn’t a tortoise. The Mock Turtle chastises her, explaining that he was so named because he “taught us.” He goes on to talk about his education, which he considers to be the finest available. He studied a variety of unusual subjects, including Reeling and Writing, as well as Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision. Alice inquires about the length of the lessons, and the Mock Turtle says that they became shorter with each passing day. Alice finds this puzzling, but the Mock Turtle explains that they were called lessons because they “lessen.” When Alice asks what happened when there was no time left for lessons, the Gryphon changes the subject to games.

***Detailed Analysis:***

The Duchess tries to find a moral in everything in much the same way that Alice tries to understand her environment in terms of cause and effect. The Duchess remarks that “everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it.” Her statement resonates with Alice’s understanding that everything she encounters should result in a lesson of some kind. Alice fails to recognize that her preoccupation with rules resembles the Duchess’s preoccupation with morals. Her inability to see this parallel shows that she has not reached a level of self-awareness that will allow her to understand the power that she is capable of wielding over Wonderland.

Carroll uses the character of the Duchess to condemn the self-righteous moralizing of Victorian England. The Duchess’s relentless discussion of morals prevents Alice from having private space for her own thoughts. The Duchess seems to be corrupting Alice, and her physical advances have sexual overtones. The romantic overtures are subtle at first, but the proposal of an “experiment” to wrap her arm around Alice’s waist seems ominous and threatening, especially given the Duchess’s morals about love. The Duchess comes across as a sexual predator who makes Alice feel both “uncomfortable” and “worried.” Although one critic writes that this scene suggests Carroll’s own “fear of being seduced by a middle-aged woman,” it is more likely that Carroll meant to denounce adult didacticism and the feelings of intrusion and threat it inspires in children.

The Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are the first inhabitants of Wonderland that Alice can comfortably relate to, but she finds she cannot escape the nonsense logic that dominates their behavior. The Gryphon and Mock Turtle speak directly and have peaceable manners. They become the closest thing to friends that Alice has encountered thus far on her travels. The Gryphon chuckles at the Queen and deflates her authority by explaining that she never actually goes through with the executions she orders. Alice finds comfort in the fact that her two new companions are able to step back and critically observe the unusual aspects of Wonderland. Additionally, the Gryphon and Mock Turtle have had lives that at least bear some resemblance to Alice’s. The description of sea school reminds Alice of her own education, even though the subjects studied there are puns on the type of studies Alice might have pursued in school. However, the Gryphon and Mock Turtle inevitably begin speaking nonsense. Alice finds herself at an impasse when they fail to address the question about what happens when the lessons “lessen” to nothing. Though she has found creatures she feels comfortable with, she cannot understand them no matter how hard she tries.

***Critical Study:***

[Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/character-analysis/#Alice) and the [Duchess](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/character-analysis/#Duchess) (who's been reprieved from execution) stroll around the garden together until the Queen commands Alice to return to the game. When the game dissolves because the Queen has put all the players under sentence of death, the Queen takes Alice to meet the Gryphon, who introduces Alice to the Mock Turtle.

The Mock Turtle dolefully tells Alice a long, sad story about his education until the Gryphon interrupts and says, "Tell her something about the games."

Wordplay dominates [Chapter 9](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/chapter-9-summary/). Not much happens in this chapter, but it will please readers who like puns. The names of practically everything the Mock Turtle has ever studied are puns. For instance, when the Mock Turtle mentions "the old conger-eel," he's talking about [Lewis Carroll](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/author/)'s real-life friend John Ruskin. Ruskin, the most famous art critic of his day, taught the Liddell children drawing, etching, and painting in oils, which the Mock Turtle refers to as "Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils." Once again, Carroll is making fun of traditional schooling. He also does this at the beginning of the chapter, when the [Duchess](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/character-analysis/#Duchess) delivers a long spiel on morals. It is worth noting that the Duchess is extremely polite and that [Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Alice-in-Wonderland/character-analysis/#Alice) responds in kind.

Because this chapter deals with education, it's fitting that Trinity College at Oxford has an emblem featuring a gryphon. Carroll and the Liddell family would have often seen the gryphon on the main Trinity gates.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[The Duchess](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-duchess) is very happy to see [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) – her mood is quite changed from earlier – and she takes Alice’s arm to walk around the garden. Alice thinks to herself how she would act as a Duchess. She would feed her baby with sweet things instead, to make it sweet. The Duchess notices that Alice has stopped listening and tells her off. She adds that there is a moral to her comment, but she can’t remember it. The Duchess is fond of morals and goes on to name several. She is just the right height to rest her chin on Alice’s shoulder and speak into her ear, which bothers Alice exceedingly.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The Duchess is friendly so long as she thinks that Alice is listening to her, and nasty as soon as she thinks Alice isn't. She is not interested in Alice, just in having someone listen to her. Her insistence that everything has a moral—while being unable to remember any—makes it clear that her viewpoint about morals is ridiculous. In fact, Carroll uses the Duchess to mock those adults who are always moralizing to children, both for the way that they intrude on children's lives and into children's physical space, and also because the belief that life has a moral is patently untrue--as the craziness of Wonderland attests. It's worth noting that Victorian England, when Carroll wrote the novella, was known for its self-righteous moralizing.

***Summary part2***

[The Duchess](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-duchess) says that is weary of putting her arm around [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice)’s waist because of her flamingo’s temper. Flamingoes bite, just like mustard, she says. Alice tells the Duchess that mustard isn’t a bird; it’s in fact a vegetable. The Duchess comes up with a very complicated moral for that lesson. The Duchess enjoys pleasing Alice and boasts about her powers of moralizing, until she suddenly trails off – [the Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-queen-of-hearts) has appeared before them, furious to see the Duchess with her head still on.

***Analysis part 2:***

The exchange around mustard is further language play, as Alice confuses the Duchess's simile for an actual comparison. Alice, with her Victorian upbringing, has likely been taught that every story does have a moral, but the fact that the Duchess must cut off her boasting about her ability to moralize because she sees the Queen who wants to cut her head off for no good reason at all suggests that in fact there is no moral to life.

***Summary part 3***

[The Duchess](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-duchess) runs off and they continue with the game, but there is so much cause for execution that the cards, which are needed to be the arches, are always disappearing to do the executing and quite soon, there are neither players nor arches left. The Queen asks [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) if she knows the [Mock-Turtle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-mock-turtle) (the thing Mock-Turtle soup is made from, she explains). Alice says she doesn’t, so the Queen takes her to see it. They meet a [Gryphon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) on the way, a half-lion, half-eagle creature. The Queen leaves the Gryphon to guide Alice. The Gryphon seems very entertained by the Queen – he tells Alice that she never actually executes anybody.

***Analysis part 3:***

The Queens love of violence, which is the foundation of her control, can easily get out of hand and transform the "civilized" activities into chaos. The Gryphon is the first character in Wonderland who is not terrified of the Queen. He is the first character who can see past the surface of things to the truth—in this case that the Queen's threats of violence never escalate to actual violence. His level of awareness about the world makes him a different kind of companion for Alice.

***Summary part 4:***

They find the [Mock Turtle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-mock-turtle) sitting on a rock, singing very sorrowfully. The Gryphon says that the Mock-Turtle isn’t really sad, it’s just his fancy, and announces [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) to him. She would like to hear his history. The Turtle says he will tell it, so they all sit down and wait. He is very slow to begin, but finally he begins by saying that he used to be a “real turtle”.

***Analysis part 4:***

The Gryphon again sees past surface truths. Other characters in Wonderland (and Alice, probably) would hear the Mock-Turtle's sighs and think he is actually sad. The Gryphon knows that the Mock Turtle just enjoys seeming sad. At the same time, the Mock Turtle's story indicates that he is struggling with his identity just as Alice is. She has wondered if she was really still herself, just as the Mock Turtle now feels (or is) unreal.

***Summary Part 5:***

This beginning is followed again by a long silence, filled only by the [Mock Turtle’s](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-mock-turtle) sobbing and strange noises from the [Gryphon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters). The Turtle continues eventually, telling them that at school, he was taught by an old Turtle whom they called Tortoise, because he “taught us”. Alice doesn’t see the logic here and the Turtle and Gryphon think she’s very simple. The Turtle goes on about his fine education. He one-ups the “extras” of music and French that Alice has learned at school by adding Washing to the list. He learned many other strange subjects, like Uglification, which the Gryphon explains for Alice, thinking she really is a simpleton.

***Analysis Part 5:***

The Mock-Turtle's boasts about his fine education parody how people often boast about their education: what great teachers they had, what amazing subjects they studied, how their school was better than other schools. Yet the touting of ridiculous "important" subjects like Washing and Uglification as being better than French and Music raises the question of what's so great about French and Music? Why not Spanish and Painting, or Japanese and Rugby? And yet the Gryphon and Mock Turtle believe that the critical classes are Washing and Uglification, and see Alice, because she did not study such things, as being dumb and unsophisticated. In other words, the value ascribed to these subjects is based on society's somewhat arbitrary decisions, but society treats them not as arbitrary but as absolute.

***Summary Part 6:***

The Mock Turtle continues to list his classes and their masters. The [Gryphon](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) joins in – his Classics master was an old crab. The pair sighs to remember these old lessons. Alice asks how many lessons they had, and the Turtle replies that they had ten hours the first day and then of course they had fewer every day. Alice wonders about the twelfth day, but the Turtle is reluctant to explain and changes the subject.

***Analysis Part 6:***

These old school chums grow nostalgic for their ridiculous school. Meanwhile, more language confusion rears its head as "lesson" and "lessen" become confused. When Alice pokes holes in the Mock Turtle's story with her logic, the Mock Turtle cannot respond and instead evades.

***Important Quotations***

***Quotation 1:***

"Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with," the Mock Turtle replied; "and then the different branches of Arithmetic – Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision." (Wonderland 9.73)

***Explanation 1:***

As we're sure you've guessed, these are parodies of the subjects you learned in school: reading, writing, addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Yet all the things listed in the parody are things we learn in school too – competing for grades teaches us ambition, there are plenty of things to distract us as we study, we learn to mock and deride one another, and so on.

***Quotation 2:***

"I went to the Classical master, though. He was an old crab, he was."  
  
"I never went to him," the Mock Turtle said with a sigh. "He taught Laughing and Grief, they used to say." (Wonderland 9.82-83)

***Explanation 2:***

The things the Mock Turtle learned in school are parodies of what a good Victorian child would have learned. Unlike most American schools today, pretty much every nineteenth-century British school would have taught classics – Latin ("Laughing") and Greek ("Grief") language and literature. The puns are based on the fact that Latin is an easier language to learn than Greek (grief).

***Quotation 3:***

Alice

"I've been to a day-school, too," said Alice. "You needn't be so proud as all that." "With extras?" asked the Mock Turtle, a little anxiously. "Yes," said Alice: "we learned French and music." "And washing?" said the Mock Turtle. "Certainly not!" said Alice indignantly. "Ah! Then yours wasn't a really good school," said the Mock Turtle in a tone of great relief. "Now, at ours, they had, at the end of the bill, 'French, music, and washing – extra.'" (Wonderland 9.64-69)

***Explanation 3:***

As the annotations to any good edition of the book will tell you, the Mock Turtle is confusing the fees for extra subjects at boarding school with the fee they charge for doing your laundry. His rationale seems to be that anything you pay for makes you more educated. But we know that (unfortunately) it takes more than buying a lesson to really learn it.

***Quotation 4:***

"What else had you to learn?" "Well, there was Mystery," the Mock Turtle replied, counting off the subjects on his flappers – "Mystery, ancient and modern, with Seaography: then Drawling – the Drawling-master was an old conger-eel, that used to come once a week: he taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils." (Wonderland 9.78-79)

***Explanation 4:***

OK, "Mystery" is history, "Seaography" is geography, "Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils" are drawing, sketching, and painting in oils. Of all these, we're most amused by "Mystery," since so many of the things that have happened over the course of human history are bizarre, ridiculous, or inexplicable.

***Quotation 5:***

Tut, tut, child!" said the Duchess. "Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it." (Wonderland 9.6)

***Explanation 5:***

By putting this Victorian commonplace into the mouth of the ridiculous Duchess, Lewis Carroll shows us how absurd it really is. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was one of the first major works of children's literature that placed entertainment value above moral instruction. After all, not everything does have a moral – some things are just wrong, or absurd, or ridiculous. Carroll almost anticipates existentialism here. It's a bit depressing, really, but it's saved by our laughter.

***Quotation 6:***

"Maybe it's always pepper that makes people hot-tempered," she went on, very much pleased at having found out a new kind of rule, "and vinegar that makes them sour – and camomile that makes them bitter – and – and barley-sugar and such things that make children sweet-tempered. I only wish people knew that: then they wouldn't be so stingy about it, you know – " (Wonderland 9.3)

***Explanation 6:***

As absurd as this "rule" might be, what's more absurd is the truth that people's moods may not be related to anything going on in the world around them.