***Characters***

***Alice***

Alice is in some ways the most complex and the simplest of Carroll's characters. Her character was modeled on that of his young friend Alice Pleasance Liddell, middle daughter of the classics professor and dean of Christ Church College, Oxford. Although John Tenniel's illustrations of Alice look nothing like Alice Liddell - she had short, dark hair cut into bangs, while Tenniel's little girl has long blonde hair - some of the characteristics of Miss Liddell remain in the character of Carroll's Alice. Carroll described his dream-Alice in an article entitled "Alice on the Stage" as loving, courteous, "trustful, ready to accept the wildest impossibilities with all that utter trust that only dreamers know; and lastly, curious - wildly curious, and with the eager enjoyment of Life that comes only in the happy hours of childhood, when all is new and fair, and when Sin and Sorrow are but names - empty words signifying nothing!"

Carroll's Alice is all of these things and more. She is an ordinary person trying to make sense of a senseless situation and to understand the curious realm into which she has wandered. In Wonderland, Alice is caught in a predicament where none of the rules or logic she has learned does her any good. The creatures of Wonderland behave to her like the Victorian adults of her outside world: they ignore conventional rules in favor of rules of their own that make no sense to anyone but themselves. Alice tries to deal with them logically and fails; the dream only ends for her when she rejects their world in favor of the outside world.

Alice is also a reflection of her own society: in the early chapters of the book she is sometimes arrogant and careless of the feelings of others. Morton N. Cohen writes in his critical biography *Lewis Carroll* that Alice is the means through which Carroll criticizes and compliments Victorian society. "He wove fear, condescension, rejection, and violence into the tales, and the children who read them feel their hearts beat faster and their skin tingle, not so much with excitement as with an uncanny recognition of themselves, of the hurdles they have confronted and had to overcome. Repelled by Alice's encounters, they are also drawn to them because they recognize them as their own. These painful and damaging experiences are the price children pay in all societies in all times when passing through the dark corridors of their young lives." However, in the end, Cohen concludes, Alice overcomes the problems that face her and emerges a stronger person.

***Alice's Sister***

Alice's sister is unnamed throughout the course of the story. She appears briefly at the beginning - the book she is reading launches Alice on her dream voyage - and in a more lengthy passage at the end of the book, in which she herself dreams about the adventures Alice has just had. Alice's sister offers an adult perspective to the entire Wonderland adventure, interpreting Alice's dream in her own way and then going on to dream about Alice's own future.

Alice Pleasance Liddell, Carroll's model for the character Alice, had in fact two sisters: Lorina Charlotte, three years older than herself, and Edith, two years younger. Alice's sister apparently is based on neither of the two other Liddells. If there is a historical character that Alice's sister is supposed to represent, it is probably Carroll himself.

Baby

See Pig Baby

Bill the Lizard

Bill is a lizard, one of the White Rabbit's helpers. He is sent down the chimney of the White Rabbit's house to get Alice out of the place.

***Canary***

Canary is one of the birds that flee Alice's company after she begins to talk about her cat Dinah. The Canary "called out in a trembling voice, to its children, 'Come away, my dears! It's high time you were all in bed!'"

***Caterpillar***

Alice meets the Caterpillar and spends most of Chapter 5 trying to understand his twisted logic. When she first encounters him, the Caterpillar is sitting on a mushroom and smoking a hookah, a type of water pipe from the Middle East. It is at the Caterpillar's insistence that Alice recites Carroll's "You Are Old, Father William" - a parody of Robert Southey's poem "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." Although he is initially very rude to Alice, the Caterpillar finally tells her that the mushroom will help her control her height.

***Cheshire Cat***

The Cheshire Cat first appears in the kitchen with the Duchess, the Cook, and the Baby. It has an unusual grin, as well as the strange ability to fade into invisibility - sometimes one part at a time. The Cheshire Cat is one of the few animals in Wonderland that apparently has some sympathy with Alice. He guides her on the next step of her journey (the Mad Tea Party) and is the subject of what may be Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's most quoted line: "'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'" The Cat reappears and provokes an argument between the executioner and The King of Hearts about whether one can decapitate a bodiless character.

The Cheshire Cat's grin is one of the most debated questions about Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Why does the Cheshire Cat grin? There was a common phrase in Carroll's time, "to grin like a Cheshire Cat," but no one really knows how the phrase originated. One theory holds that the grin is based on pictures of grinning lions that a local painter used to paint on the signboards of inns. Another states that Cheshire cheeses were sometimes molded into the shape of grinning cats. Carroll, who was born in the county of Cheshire, could have known both theories. Although he is one of the most popular characters in the Alice stories, the Cheshire Cat does not appear in the original manuscript version, Alice's Adventures Under Ground.

***Cook***

The Cook serves in the Duchess's kitchen. She is primarily noted for two qualities: she throws things (mostly kitchen utensils) at the Duchess and the Baby, and she cooks with an excessive amount of pepper, which causes the Baby and the Duchess to sneeze. She appears again as a witness against the Knave of Hearts.

***Crab***

See Old Crab

***Dinah***

Dinah is Alice's cat. She does not appear in person. It is Alice's thoughtless talking about her cat that finally alienates the animals and birds. "Dinah" was also the name of a cat owned by the Liddell girls.

***Dodo***

The Dodo appears in the drying-off sequence. He suggests the Caucus-Race as a means of drying off and later calls on Alice to provide the prizes for the winners. In the original manuscript, the Dodo makes the suggestion to move the party to a nearby house to dry off.

Like the Mouse and the Duck, the Dodo represents another of the characters who traveled on the "golden afternoon" on which the Alice story was first composed. According to a note in Martin Gardner's The Annotated Alice, the Dodo was Carroll himself. "When Carroll stammered he pronounced his name 'Do-Do-Dodgson,' and it is amusing to note that when his biography entered the Encyclopaedia Britannica it was inserted just before the entry on the Dodo."

***Dormouse***

Dormouse is the third character at the Mad Tea Party. The name is actually derived from the Latin verb dormire, which means "to sleep." It looks more like a small squirrel than a mouse. It hibernates during the winter and sleeps during the day, so the name is quite appropriate. Since Alice is touring Wonderland during the day, the Dormouse is very sleepy. Nevertheless, it is able to participate in the tea party and even begins a nonsense tale before falling to sleep again. Martin Gardner reports in The Annotated Alice that the Dormouse may have been inspired by the pet wombat of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a noted literary figure of Carroll's time. Rossetti's wombat "had a habit of sleeping on the table," Gardner writes. "Carroll knew all the Rossettis and occasionally visited them." The Dormouse does not appear at all in Carroll's original manuscript story, Alice's Adventures Under Ground.

***Duchess***

When Alice first encounters the Duchess, she is sitting in the kitchen with the Cook and the Cheshire Cat, and she holds the Baby who will later turn into a Pig. She also sings the Carrollian poem "Speak Roughly to Your Little Boy," a parody of a Victorian verse about manners. She also abuses the Baby by shaking it and tossing it up into the air, and at the end of the poem she throws it at Alice.

John Tenniel's famous big-mouthed illustration of the Duchess from the original edition of the novel is probably based on a portrait of Margaretha Maultasch, a duchess of Carinthia and Tyrol during the fourteenth century. Martin Gardner, in his The Annotated Alice, reports that "'Maultasch,' meaning 'pocket-mouth,' was a name given to her because of the shape of her mouth." He also explains that Margaretha "had the reputation of being the ugliest woman in history." Carroll's Duchess appears again, and is now very friendly to Alice. Then it is revealed that the Queen had sentenced her to death, and she leaves quickly.

***Duck***

The Duck is one of the birds that gets caught in the pool of Alice's tears. The Duck gets into an argument with the Mouse over the interpretation of a pronoun in the "dry" passage of English history that the Mouse reads. The Duck originally represented Reverend Robinson Duckworth, a companion of Carroll and the Liddell sisters on the "golden afternoon" on which Carroll told Alice Liddell the story that became Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

***Eaglet***

The Eaglet is one of the animals caught in the pool of tears. She demands that the Dodo "speak English" and adds, "I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and, what's more, I don't believe you do either!" The Eaglet represents Alice Liddell's younger sister Edith Liddell.

***Father William***

Father William is the title character of Carroll's parody poem "You Are Old, Father William," a takeoff of Robert Southey's didactic poem "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." Carroll's poem inverts the didactic purpose of Southey's original. While the Old Man in Southey's poem won his comforts through thriftiness, conservative behavior, and religious devotion, Carroll's Father William moves through his old age by refusing to conform to Victorian norms. While Southey's young man seeks to understand his father's good health and good humor, Carroll's young man seeks information only to satisfy his curiosity. Carroll's poem ends with Father William's threat to kick his son downstairs.

***Father William's Son***

Father William's Son is the other character in Carroll's parody poem "You Are Old, Father William," a take-off of Robert Southey's didactic poem "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." While Southey's young man seeks to understand his father's good health and good humor, Carroll's young man seeks information only to satisfy his curiosity. Carroll's poem ends with Father William's threat to kick his son downstairs.

***Fish-Footman***

The Fish-Footman brings an invitation to the Duchess from the Queen to play croquet.

***Five of Spades***

Five of Spades is one of the gardeners Alice discovers in the Queen's garden who are painting the white roses red.

***Frog-Footman***

The doorman at the house of the Duchess, the Frog-Footman goes outside to accept the invitation from the Queen for the Duchess to play croquet that afternoon. He then poses a logical conundrum for Alice: since he can only answer the door from inside the house, how is she to get in? Alice discusses the problem with him for some time before she finally gives up, opens the door to the Duchess's house herself, and goes in.

***Griffin***

The Gryphon is assigned by the Queen of Hearts to be Alice's guide and takes her to see the Mock Turtle. He is one of the more sympathetic characters in the novel, and he treats Alice better than most of his fellow Wonderland creatures.

***Guinea Pigs***

Guinea Pigs appear in several different roles in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. A couple of them serve as the White Rabbit's servants and help revive Bill the Lizard after Alice kicks him up the chimney in Chapter IV. Another couple - or perhaps the same ones - serve as jurors in the trial of the Knave of Hearts in Chapters XI and XII.

***King of Hearts***

The King of Hearts first makes his appearance at the Queen's croquet party, but his most important role is as the conductor of the Knave of Heart's trial. He objects to the Cheshire Cat's rudeness and sentences the animal to lose its head. He is not as forceful as his wife, the Queen of Hearts, but he shares with her and the other Wonderland characters a form of logic that first confuses Alice, then irritates her.

***Knave of Hearts***

Made of cardboard, the Knave (or Jack) of Hearts makes a brief appearance in Chapter 8. He is later arrested and held for trial on the charge of stealing the Queen's tarts.

***Lory***

Lory is a type of Australian parrot who gets into an argument with Alice, and "at last turned sulky, and would only say, 'I'm older than you, and must know better.'" Critics agree that the Lory represents Lorinda Liddell, Alice's older sister, who was also a participant on the "golden afternoon" on which the concept of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was composed.

***Mad Hatter***

The Mad Hatter, like his friend the March Hare, is stuck in an endless tea time. In Carroll's time, hat makers regularly used mercury to treat their hats, and mercury vapor is poisonous. It can cause hallucinations as well. The depiction of the Hatter in the original illustrations by John Tenniel may be based in part on an Oxford furniture dealer named Theophilus Carter. "Carter," says Martin Gardner in his The Annotated Alice, "was known in the area as the Mad Hatter, partly because he always wore a top hat and partly because of his eccentric ideas." Carter invented a bed that tossed the sleeper out on the floor when the alarm went off, which "may explain why Carroll's Hatter is so concerned with time as well as with arousing a sleepy dormouse." His poem "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat" parodies Jane Taylor's song "The Star," and he proposes the famous riddle "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" He appears again as a witness in the trial of the Knave of Hearts. He does not appear at all in Carroll's original manuscript story, Alice's Adventures Under Ground.

***March Hare***

The March Hare hosts the Mad Tea Party. He is called the March Hare because he is mad. In England March is the breeding season for hares, and they often act strangely during the month. With his friends the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse, he is stuck in a perpetual tea party, in which time never progresses and tea never ends. He is very argumentative and challenges almost all of Alice's remarks by challenging the meanings of specific words. When Alice leaves the tea party, she looks back to see the Hatter and the Hare trying to drown the Dormouse in a teapot. He later appears as a witness in the trial of the Knave of Hearts. He does not appear at all in Carroll's original manuscript story, Alice's Adventures Under Ground.

***Mary Ann***

Mary Ann is the White Rabbit's servant. He mistakes Alice for her in Chapter IV, but she never actually appears in the book.

***Mock Turtle***

The Mock Turtle is a character who has the front limbs and shell of a turtle and the head and hind limbs of a calf, because "mock turtle soup" is made from veal. In Chapters 9 and 10 he entertains Alice with the story of his education (liberally sprinkled with puns) and the song known as "The Lobster Quadrille" - a parody of a poem by Mary Howitt called "The Spider and the Fly." He also performs "Beautiful Soup," a Carrollian parody of a popular song, "Star of the Evening," that Carroll had heard the Liddell sisters sing on occasion.

***Mouse***

Mouse is the first creature Alice meets after she falls into the pool of her own tears she had cried while she was nine feet tall. Alice inadvertently offends the Mouse by talking about her cat Dinah, but the Mouse forgives her and tries to help her dry off by reciting a passage from a very dry - in the sense of boring - book of English history. Later the Mouse tells her and the other assembled animals "The Mouse's Tale," perhaps the most famous example in English of "figured" verse, poetry in which the shape of the poem reflects something of the poem's subject matter.

In the original manuscript, the Mouse was held to represent Alice Liddell's governess Miss Prickett. The book with the very dry passage that the Mouse quotes was an actual book of English history that Miss Prickett used to teach the Liddell children.

***Old Crab***

The Old Crab gives a moral lesson to her daughter: "Let this be a lesson to you never to lose your temper!"

***Old Magpie***

The Old Magpie is one of the "curious creatures" from the pool of tears. When Alice begins to talk about her cat Dinah, the Old Magpie declares, "I really must be getting home: the night air doesn't suit my throat!" and leaves.

***Pat***

Pat is the White Rabbit's manservant. He speaks with an Irish brogue and tries to get Alice out of the White Rabbit's house.

***Pig Baby***

The Baby first appears in Chapter 6, where he is alternately wailing at the Duchess and sneezing from the Cook's pepper. After Alice rescues him from the Duchess's abuse and the Cook's thrown dishes, he changes into a Pig. Martin Gardner, in his The Annotated Alice, suggests that Carroll made the Baby change into a Pig because of his low opinion of little boys.

***Pigeon***

Alice encounters the Pigeon after the Caterpillar's mushroom has made her grow up over the surrounding trees. The Pigeon mistakes her for a serpent because Alice's neck has grown very long. The Pigeon cannot conceive of anything that long and serpent-like being anything but a serpent and refuses to accept the idea that Alice does not want to eat her eggs.

***Puppy***

Alice encounters the Puppy toward the end of Chapter 4, after she shrinks to a height of three inches. Because of her smallness the playful puppy poses a serious threat to Alice, and she is forced to run away from it. She compares playing with the Puppy to "having a game of play with a cart-horse, and expecting every moment to be trampled under its feet."

***Queen of Hearts***

The Queen of Hearts is the driving force behind Wonderland. She constantly orders the execution of her subjects, but her command "off with his head!" is never carried out. It is fear of her anger that motivates the White Rabbit at the beginning of the book, and it is fear of the queen that suppresses the Duchess's behavior. Alice's own anger at the Queen's illogical, reckless behavior makes her overturn the conventions of Wonderland and break out of her dream at the end of the book. In "Alice on the Stage," Carroll wrote, "I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion - a blind and aimless Fury." "Her constant orders for beheadings," explains Martin Gardner in his The Annotated Alice, "are shocking to those modern critics of children's literature who feel that juvenile fiction should be free of all violence and especially violence with Freudian overtones."

***Seven of Spades***

The Seven of Spades is one of the gardeners Alice discovers in the Queen's garden who are painting the white roses red.

***Two of Spades***

The Two of Spades is one of the gardeners Alice discovers in the Queen's garden who are painting the white roses red.

***White Rabbit***

White Rabbit is the first character that Alice meets in her dream wonderland. He looks much like any other white rabbit, with a white coat and pink eyes, but he wears a waistcoat (vest) and carries a large gold watch. John Tenniel's illustration from the first edition of the novel shows him wearing a jacket and carrying an umbrella. He also speaks English, but to Alice his clothes and watch are his most amazing characteristics. In the second chapter he drops his white kid gloves and a fan, which Alice picks up; it is the fan that causes her to shrink to below her normal size. (In the original manuscript, Alice's Adventures Under Ground, the fan was replaced by a nosegay, a small bouquet of flowers.) Later he mistakes Alice for his maidservant Mary Ann.

The White Rabbit, with his preoccupation with time and clothing, is in many ways a representative Victorian adult. Carroll wrote about him in the article "Alice on the Stage": "For her 'youth, "audacity, "vigour,' and 'swift directness of purpose,' read 'elderly, "timid, "feeble,' and 'nervously shilly-shallying,' and you will get something of what I meant him to be." "I think the White Rabbit should wear spectacles," the author continued. "I am sure his voice should quaver, and his knees quiver, and his whole air suggest a total inability to say 'Boo' to a goose!"

***Identity***

Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has been one of the most analyzed books of all time. Critics have viewed it as a work of philosophy, as a criticism of the Church of England, as full of psychological symbolism, and as an expression of the drug culture of the 1960s. Readers all differ in their interpretations of the book, but there are a few themes that have won general acceptance. One of the clearly identifiable subjects of the story is the identity question. One of the first things that the narrator says about Alice after her arrival in the antechamber to Wonderland is that "this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people." The physical sign of her loss of identity is the changes in size that take place when she eats or drinks. After she drinks the cordial and eats the cake in Chapter 1, for instance, she loses even more of her sense of self, until at the beginning of Chapter 2 she is reduced to saying, "I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I?" She begins to cry and to fan herself with the White Rabbit's fan, which causes her to shrink down to almost nothing. After she shrinks, she falls into a pool of her own tears, in which she almost drowns. For Alice, the question of identity is a vital one.

Alice continues to question her identity until the final chapters of the book. When the White Rabbit mistakes her for his servant Mary Ann, she goes along willingly to his house to find his gloves. At the beginning of her encounter with the Caterpillar in Chapter 5, she answers his question "Who are you?" with the response "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." At the end of Chapter 5, she tells the hostile Pigeon who calls her a serpent that she is a little girl; but she says it "rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day." As late as Chapter 10, she says to the Gryphon, "I could tell you my adventures - beginning from this morning ... but it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then." As she progresses through Wonderland, however, Alice slowly gains a greater sense of herself and eventually overthrows the Queen of Hearts' cruel court.

***Coming of Age***

The question ofwhy Alice is so confused about her identity has to do with her developing sense of the difference between childhood and adulthood. She is surrounded by adult figures and figures of authority: the Duchess, the Queen, the King. Even the animals she encounters treat her as a Victorian adult might treat a small child. The White Rabbit and the Caterpillar order her about. They also break the rules of politeness that adults have drilled into Alice. The Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and (to a lesser extent) the Dormouse are all rude to her in various degrees. They also break the rules of logic that Alice has been taught to follow. It is not until Alice stops trying to understand the Wonderland residents logically and rejects their world that she "comes of age" - she takes responsibility for her own actions and breaks powerfully out of her dream world.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is, on this level, a very affirming book for children. It offers them a path by which they can find their own way into the power of adulthood. "By a magical combination of memory and intuition," writes Morton N. Cohen in his critical biography Lewis Carroll, "Charles keenly appreciated what it was like to be a child in a grown-up society, what it meant to be scolded, rejected, ordered about. The Alice books are antidotes to the child's degradation.... Charles champions the child in the child's confrontation with the adult world, and in that, too, his book differs from most others. He treats children ... as equals. He has a way of seeing into their minds and hears, and he knows how to train their minds painlessly and move their hearts constructively."

***Absurdity***

Carroll communicates Alice's confusion about her own identity and her position between childhood and adulthood by contrasting her logical, reasoned behavior with that of the inhabitants of Wonderland. Everything about Wonderland is absurd by Alice's standards. From the moment that she spots the White Rabbit taking his watch from his waistcoat pocket, Alice tries to understand the twisted Wonderland logic. None of the rules she has been taught seem to work here. The inhabitants meet her politeness with rudeness and respond to her questions with answers that make no sense. The Mad Hatter's question "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" is an example. Alice believes that he is posing a riddle and tries to answer it, believing (logically) that the Hatter would not ask a riddle without knowing the answer. When she is unable to answer the question, the Hatter explains that there is no answer. He does not explain his reasons for asking the riddle; he simply says that he hasn't "the slightest idea" of the answer. When Alice protests that asking riddles with no answers wastes time, the Hatter responds with a lecture on the nature of Time, which he depicts as a person. The connections between the two subjects make no logical sense to Alice.

Alice's encounter with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are as equally absurd, although less grating, as the Mad Tea Party. When the two of them call on her to recite, Alice begins another of Carroll's nonsense verses, "'Tis the Voice of the Lobster." At the end, she "sat down with her face in her hands, wondering if anything would ever happen in a natural way again." Alice finally rebels during the trial scene when the King requires All persons more than a mile high to leave the court. She objects to the absurd nature of the trial, saying finally "Stuff and nonsense!" and "Who cares for you?" "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" Her final break precipitates the end of her dream, and she wakes up with her head in her sister's lap.

***Childhood and Adulthood:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice)’s experiences in Wonderland can be taken as a kind of exaggerated metaphor for the experience of growing up, both in terms of physically growing up and coming to understand the world of adults and how that world differs from a child's expectation of it. [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice)’s anxiety about growing up and about the wide world beyond her familiar comforts can be seen in her constant evaluation of her own size and worth. She physically grows and shrinks again and again in the story, at times not even able to see her whole shape. Her preoccupation with growing and shrinking, and finding the right size for what she needs to do, evokes how disorienting the idea of growing up can be. The physical changes can be both frightening and exhilarating.

Alice’s sense of how life should be, how she, as a child, has been taught about life, can be seen in the stories she tells, which are full of goodness, love and affection. Whenever she meets a character that challenges her or appears rude, she recites the lessons and proverbial phrases that she has overheard in the classroom and from her parents. “`You should learn not to make personal remarks,'” says Alice to the [Hatter](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters). In this way, Alice’s Wonderland allows her to be both child and adult at the same time – she tests out her authority and expertise in just the way her parents and teachers must tell her what to do, but at the same time she is forced to confront the fact that people, adults, do make personal remarks (along with other things she has been taught are bad.)

The adults in Alice in Wonderland order Alice around and give her advice and act like they are wise, but their orders are ridiculous and often cruel (like the [Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-queen-of-hearts) shouting at Alice about her impertinence when Alice is only being logical, their lectures are dry and boring, and sometimes their stories are both tragic and completely irrational, such as that of the [Mock-Turtle](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-mock-turtle)). The “adults” of Wonderland show themselves to be less trustworthy, less good, than adults should be from the point of view of an innocent child. Further, the adults can be violent. In the [Duchess](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-duchess)’ house, Alice hears the Duchess say “Off with her head” and thinks nothing of it, amid the absurd cooking rituals of the cook and the howling of the pig-baby. But as the dream goes on, this threat of beheading, of killing, becomes more real as it is spouted and over and over within the context of the ridiculous trial of the Queen of Hearts. The contradictions and inconsistencies of the adult world with how adults have told Alice she should behave is hereby revealed to not just be something that’s funny and ridiculous (though it is that), it is also frightening and dangerous. The context of Wonderland allows Carrol to explore these ideas in a safe space of a “dream,” but by creating such a space it allows him to explore those ideas more fully than he could in a realistic novel.

***Dreams and Reality:***

Alice in Wonderland is a dream world, full of curiousness, confusion and talking animals. Everything is a little off. This can be delightful and fund, but it can also create a menacing atmosphere that threatens to turn the story from a child’s story of adventure and nonsense to something more like a nightmare, though it never quite does tip into true nightmare.

What is perhaps even more interesting, though, is the way that the ridiculous dream world of Wonderland comments or parodies the real world. Wonderland is full of misunderstanding, of meaninglessness, of pointless races, pompous characters, maudlin stories or reminiscences without purpose, and is further full of commands from leaders that make absolutely no sense and are based on pure vanity and cluelessness. Its residents mainly just want to get by and survive and maybe have a good time. Its justice is often laughably faulty. In other words, as a child growing up might realize as the curtains on the adult and "real" world fall away, Wonderland isn't actually so different from that real world. The real world may be less exaggerated in its arbitrary rules and adult nonsense, crookedness, cowardice, and venality, but it has such traits in equal measure, and in many ways the cruelty of the real world is greater. Wonderland, then, because it is a ridiculous dream, becomes a lace where [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) can begin to navigate the real world without, yet, having to actually face that real world.

***Words, Meanings and Meaninglessness:***

Wordplay makes Wonderland what it is. The moment [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice) descends into the rabbit hole world, she starts questioning everything the world above takes for granted, including and especially language. Sentences and phrases are twisted and turned around so that they mean several things at once and cause misunderstandings and humorous clashes between the characters. “`Do bats eat cats?'” Alice asks as she falls down the rabbit hole, trying to think of life above and life in the rabbit hole at once. “for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it.” The order of the phrases doesn't matter because the meaning behind the phrases is unclear. And Wonderland is a place where Alice is struggling to find the meaning of the changes that are happening to her.

When [the Mouse](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters) in the Caucus-race scene misunderstands Alice and leaves her, offended, Alice is left alone and disoriented – this happens a lot with the characters in Wonderland. Alice’s journey is fraught with misunderstandings and offences due to language. Her inability to recite rhymes that she used to know by heart warn her that adulthood might be a less musical, comfortable place—or that she has ceased to be herself, as she no longer knows what she once did. And so words and meaning becomes tied up with the idea of the self, of who a person is.

The entire narrative has a verse-like quality because it is so packed with rhymes and recognizable phrases that should be set to tunes. But while in a traditional children’s song or rhyme, the moral or message is clear, in Wonderland, nonsense rules and it is difficult to attach meaning, consequence, or moral to almost anything. The Mad Hatter is especially affected by this condition of meaninglessness and he is also one of the most wordy of the characters, constantly assessing his own and others’ grammar and syntax to challenge the received meanings of language.

***The Nature of Being and not being:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/alice)’s world is a philosophical puzzle. Even though she is just a child, Alice thinks and reflects deeply and comes up with some very existential problems. While in Wonderland she comes to wonder if she has become a different child completely, and lists the children she knows, trying to work out how their attributes define them as being Mabel or Ada. She then puzzles over the meaning of ‘I’. Such a fundamental question of existence and identity is huge for a child to ponder, and it casts quite an uneasy shadow over Alice’s movements through Wonderland. Her identity changes with each new scene and collection of characters, each questioning her and her authority, just as she herself does. The first thing the [Caterpillar](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland/characters/the-caterpillar) says to Alice is “Who are YOU?” and she is trying to find a consistent answer to this question the whole way through the story. Just as in life, the prospect of growing up and becoming someone different is threatening her sense of self and her vision of everything around her.

Questioning the nature of being also inevitably brings up the question of not being. In Wonderland, though absurdity and confusion abound, death still looms in a real way. Just as in Alice’s life as a well-off rather sheltered child, the idea of death is both ever present, but shadowy and distant at the same time – a constant terrifying threat that never quite materializes… yet.

***Setting***

The novel opens with a bored and sleepy Alice sitting with her sister on the riverbank on a hot day. Suddenly she notices a White Rabbit with pink eyes run close by her. She hears him say "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" as he pulls a watch out of his waistcoat-pocket. He scurries down a rabbit-hole under a hedge. Alice follows him and falls into Wonderland.

Carroll immediately situates readers in Wonderland's setting. As Alice tumbles down, down, down, she sees cupboards and bookshelves, maps, and pictures hung on pegs. She thinks the fall may never end.

Then she plops, without a scratch, onto a pile of sticks and dry leaves. She follows White Rabbit as he hurries down a long passage, and the tale's magic unfolds.

Although Wonderland is a place where anything can happen, the events are nonetheless grounded in a realistic setting. Familiar things make the story believable: a three-legged glass table, a tiny golden key, locked doors, and "the loveliest garden you ever saw." To further ground the story in reality, Carroll develops his tale using events typical of 19th-century England. For example, a tea party with the Mad Hatter, a game of croquet at the Queen's court, and a court of justice trial where Alice sees a justice's "great wig," effectively define and highlight the era.

Yet, Carroll's unique presentation delights and entertains. For example, longing to enter the garden of flowers and cool fountains, Alice discovers a magical potion that says "DRINK ME." After confirming the bottle does not say, "poison," she drinks it and shrinks to ten inches. Now she can get through the door into the garden.

Carroll's characters display many of the author's own characteristics. For example, the White Rabbit's obsession with losing his gloves parallels Carroll's own fear of misplacing his gloves. The King of Hearts and his Queen constantly proclaim "off-with-his-head," and "off-with-her-head," proclamations that highlight Carroll's awareness of hierarchy in a humorous way. This lightheartedness may have originated from Carroll's father, who expressed an exaggerated sense of fun in his letters to Carroll.

In addition, Carroll reflects his personal lifestyle. For example, the story opens on a riverbank, paralleling Carroll's love of boating. He refers to "these three little sisters - they were learning to draw" presumably referring to the Liddell sisters. Overall, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland captures the pure and magic imagination of childhood.

Carroll creates an atmosphere that makes living through a child's eyes possible.

***Social Sensitivity***

As a literary character, Alice is valuable for breaking the stereotype of the demure, passive Victorian girl. Alice's adventures suggest that intellectual curiosity and competency are characteristics not limited by sex. Alice is interested in discovering meanings in life; her kind of curiosity is valuable in the study of science and philosophy.

Many aspects of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland question the solemn and sometimes hypocritical attitudes toward children demonstrated in the literature of Victorian England. The lullaby the Duchess sings to her baby, for example, parodies a song, popular in Carroll's time, called "Speak Gently." The popular song urges parents to "Speak gently to the little child/ Its love be sure to gain," while the Duchess insists that a parent must "Speak roughly to your little boy/ and beat him when he sneezes." By giving directly opposite advice on the question of child rearing, the Duchess reveals the excessive sentimentality of the popular view, and hints that the reality may be different from that portrayed in the song.

Throughout Alice's adventures, Carroll calls upon the reader to note that nonsense can be made to sound very much like sense. He thus alerts the reader to think critically about the sense behind everyday language. This critical way of looking at language is especially important when applied to the words of those in authority. The King and Queen of Hearts assert their authority over the rest of the cards simply because a higher value has been assigned to them than to the rest of the "pack." They use their power (represented by their words) foolishly and arbitrarily and Alice refuses to accept them at "face-card" value, calling them to account. It is this emphasis on the need to examine the power of words and other conventional symbols that makes Alice's Adventures in Wonderland perennially relevant to social concerns.

***Literary Qualities***

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, like all great literary works, challenges the young reader to question certain conventional ways of thinking, in this case to recognize that the meaning of words can be flexible. They can be played with in such a way that a listener or reader becomes confused, amused, or even angry over what may be, upon closer examination, nothing but nonsense.

Alice's adventures also demonstrate the importance of words to our sense of identity and value. Because Alice's Adventures in Wonderland calls attention to the slippery relationship between words and meanings, the reader is made aware that language (in textbooks, novels, films, and newspapers) must be challenged again and again if important concepts are to be separated from nonsense.

The humorous verses Carroll places in the mouths of his Wonderland characters provide a literary treat for his readers. From Alice's rendition of "You are Old, Father William," to the Mock Turtle's tribute to "Beautiful Soup," the teasing verses in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland are real tests of the imagination. In fact, the Victorian prose of the story demands that the reader visit a world of expression not available in modern everyday experience. Thus, the reader who stays with Alice from beginning to end comes away from the adventure verbally and intellectually enriched.

When Alice leaves the security of the riverbank to satisfy her curiosity about the White Rabbit, she sets out on a quest requiring her to overcome a series of obstacles before she can return home.

This basic plot structure - departing, overcoming, returning - places Alice's Adventures in Wonderland in the tradition of the quest tale, which includes such works as the Odyssey, the Aeneid, and The Faerie Queen. The same structure provides the basis for classics of children's literature like Gulliver's Travels and The Wizard of Oz. It may seem that Alice's adventures are trivial compared to the trials of Odysseus and Ulysses or the perils of the Redcrosse Knight. But it is important to remember that, like these other heroes, Alice must defend herself against fantastic creatures three or four times her size. In Alice's quest, however, the battles are largely verbal ones. The oddness of the creatures Alice meets is emphasized by what they say and how they say it. Alice and the reader often seem to forget the visual appearance of her opponent as she becomes engaged in her linguistic struggles.

Alice's adventures fit, too, into the dream tradition, a tradition used by - among other writers - James Joyce in Finnegans Wake, and Frank Baum in The Wizard of Oz. The characters who inhabit dreams are permitted a different sort of freedom of action, thought, and speech than those restrained by realistic conventions. Dreams also generate a logic that is most often a distortion of reality. Yet these distortions somehow reveal the "nonsense" at the core of much of what we take to be common sense.

The story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has also shown an extraordinary ability to inspire striking illustrations. From Carroll's own illustrations in the original edition to Franz Haacken's elongated stylizations in 1970, the story has elicited some of the most engaging and memorable illustrations of all times.

Perhaps the best known are those of Sir John Tenniel whose pen and ink drawings were reproduced in the 1866 edition and have come to be considered by many critics as "definitive."

Carroll originally called the story "Alice's Adventures Under Ground." As he prepared it for publication, he chose the title Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Wonderland seems like an ideal description of this imaginative land with its creatures and unlikely events.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland reflects Carroll's prolific writing style and showcases many of his literary qualities. For example, the author uses anthropomorphism effectively. The inanimate objects, like the deck of cards, take on human attributes - they walk two-by-two, argue while painting roses, and play croquet using live flamingos for mallets and live hedgehogs for croquet-balls. The March Hare and the Hatter have a mad tea party on top of a sleeping Dormouse.

The descriptions of the characters and imagery of the scenes reflect the era. For example, "powdered hair that curled all over" the heads of the footman in livery perhaps mimics the era's fashion. Carroll sets the stage of the court of justice by describing: "the King and Queen of Hearts were seated on their throne when they arrived, with a great crowd assembled about them - all sorts of little birds and beasts, as well as the whole pack of cards: the Knave was standing before them, in chains, with a soldier on each side to guard him; and near the King was the White Rabbit, with a trumpet in one hand, and a scroll of parchment in the other." These descriptions give a vivid image of the era's surroundings.

The author enjoyed songs, puns, and verses. Coupled with his expert rhyming skills and his academic career, these literary qualities enhance the tale. For one example, the pun includes "Reeling and Writhing, of course .. . and then the different branches of Arithmetic - Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision." Carroll also uses these qualities to emphasize the characters' dialect. For example, the Mock Turtle sings in a voice sometimes choked with sobs:

"Beautiful Soup, so rich and green, Waiting in a hot tureen!

Who for such dainties would not stoop?

Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!

Soup of the evening, beautiful Soup!

Beau-ootiful Soo-oop!

Beau-ootiful Soo-oop!

Soo-oop of the e-e-evening, Beautiful, beautiful Soup!"

The resolution unfolds quickly. As Alice confronts the King and Queen, and the Phyllis Morris (center) as the Duchess and Roma Beaumont as Alice, in a scene from the stage production of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.

court of justice jury, the deck of cards rises up into the air and descends upon her. This scene efficiently transitions readers to the riverbank where Alice awakens. Alice's sister gently brushes away leaves that have fluttered onto Alice's face. Readers realize for the first time that Alice dreamt Wonderland, and "what a wonderful dream it had been."

Carroll continues the resolution with Alice's sister contemplating the dream that had just been shared with her: the long grass rustling as White Rabbit rushed by, the pig-baby sneezing on the Duchess' knee, and the sob of the miserable Mock Turtle.

Her sister knows that if she opens her eyes, the magic of Wonderland will fade into reality. The grass would rustle without the White Rabbit, the busy-farmyard would replace the pig-baby's sneezes, and the cattle's lowing would take the place of the Mock Turtle's sobs.

Carroll concludes with a reflection on the time when Alice will remember her childhood days gone by, and the happy summer days that created Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Carroll's book influenced the history and development of children's literature. It earned the reputation as one of the most popular children's books for its use of nonsense, humor, and wit.

Style

Parody

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was originally told to entertain a little girl. One of the devices Lewis Carroll uses to communicate with Alice Liddell is parody, which adopts the style of the serious literary work and applies it to an inappropriate subject for humorous effect. Most of the songs and poems that appear in the book are parodies of well-known Victorian poems, such as Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" ("You Are Old, Father William"), Isaac Watts's "How Doth the Little Busy Bee" ("How Doth the Little Crocodile"), and Mary Howett's "The Spider and the Fly" ("Will You Walk a Little Faster"). Several of the songs were ones that Carroll had heard the Liddell sisters sing, so he knew that Alice, for whom the story was written, would appreciate them. There are also a number of "inside jokes" that might make sense only to the Liddells' or Carroll's closest associates. The Mad Hatter's song, for instance, ("Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat") is a parody of Jane Taylor's poem "The Star," but it also contains a reference to the Oxford community. "Bartholomew Price," writes Martin Gardner in his The Annotated Alice, "a distinguished professor of mathematics at Oxford and a good friend of Carroll's, was known among his student by the nickname 'The Bat.' His lectures no doubt had a way of soaring high above the heads of his listeners."

What makes Carroll's parodies so special that they have outlived the originals they mock is the fact that they are excellent humorous verses in their own right. They also serve a purpose within the book: they emphasize the underlying senselessness of Wonderland and highlight Alice's own sense of displacement. Many of them Alice recites herself under pressure from another character. "'Tis the Voice of the Lobster" is a parody of the didactic poem "The Sluggard" by Isaac Watts. It is notable that most often Alice is cut off by the same characters that require her to recite in the first place.

***Narrator***

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland opens with Alice's complaint, "For what is the use of a book ... without pictures or conversations?" So most of the story is told through pictures and dialogue. However, there is another voice besides those of Alice and the characters she encounters. The third-person ("he/she/it") narrator of the story maintains a point of view that is very different from that of the heroine. The narrator steps in to explain Alice's thoughts to the reader. The narrator explains who Dinah is, for instance, and also highlights Alice's own state of mind. He frequently refers to Alice as "poor Alice" or "the poor little thing" whenever she is in a difficult situation.

***Point of View***

Although the narrator has an impartial voice, the point of view is very strongly connected with Alice. Events are related as they happen to her and are explained as they affect her. As a result, some critics believe that the narrator is not in fact a separate voice, but is a part of Alice's own thought process. They base this interpretation on the statement in Chapter 1 that Alice "was very fond of pretending to be two people." Alice, they suggest, consists of the thoughtless child who carelessly jumps down the rabbit-hole after the White Rabbit, and the well-brought-up, responsible young girl who remembers her manners even when confronted by rude people and animals.

***Language***

Part of the way Carroll shows Wonderland to be a strange place is the way the inhabitants twist the meaning of words. Carroll plays with language by including many puns and other forms of word play. In Chapter 3, for instance, the Mouse says he can dry everyone who was caught in the pool of tears. He proceeds to recite a bit of history - "the driest thing I know." Here, of course, the Mouse means "dry" as in dull; the Mouse's words have no ability to ease the dampness of the creatures. When Alice meets the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, they play with syntax - the order of words - to confuse Alice. When she says "I say what I mean" is the same thing as "I mean what I say," the others immediately contradict her by bringing up totally unrelated examples: "'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!'" The power of language is also evident in the way Alice continually offends the inhabitants of Wonderland, often quite unintentionally. For instance, she drives away the creatures at the pool of tears just by mentioning the word "cat." Eventually Alice learns to be careful of what she says, as in Chapter 8 when she changes how she is about to describe the Queen after noticing the woman behind her shoulder.

***Historical Context***

***The Victorian Age in England***

According to his own account, Lewis Carroll composed the story that became Alice's Adventures in Wonderland on a sunny July day in 1862. He created it for the Liddell sisters while on a boating trip up the Thames River. Although the book and its sequel Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There have since become timeless classics, they nonetheless clearly reflect their Victorian origins in their language, their class-consciousness, and their attitude toward children. The Victorian age, named for the long rule of Britain's Queen Victoria, spanned the years 1837 to 1901.

The early Victorian era marked the emergence of a large middle-class society for the first time in the history of the Western world. With this middle-class population came a spread of so-called "family values": polite society avoided mentioning sex, sexual passions, bodily functions, and in extreme cases, body parts. They also followed an elaborate code of manners meant to distinguish one class from another. By the 1860s, the result, for most people, was a kind of stiff and gloomy prudery marked by a feeling that freedom and enjoyment of life were sinful and only to be indulged in at the risk of immorality. Modern critics have mostly condemned the Victorians for these repressive attitudes.

The tone for the late Victorian age was set by Queen Victoria herself. She had always been a very serious and self-important person from the time she took the throne at the age of eighteen; it is reported that when she became queen, her first resolution was, "I will be good." After the death of her husband Albert in 1861, however, Victoria became more and more withdrawn, retreating from public life and entering what became a lifelong period of mourning. Many middle-class Englishmen and women followed her example, seeking to find morally uplifting and mentally stimulating thoughts in their reading and other entertainments.

***Victorian Views of Childhood***

Many upper-middle-class Victorians had a double view of childhood. Childhood was regarded as the happiest period of a person's life, a simple and uncomplicated time. At the same time, children were also thought to be "best seen and not heard." Some Victorians also neglected their children, giving them wholly over into the care of nurses, nannies and other child-care professionals. Boys often went away to boarding school, while girls were usually taught at home by a governess. The emphasis for all children, but particularly girls, was on learning manners and how to fit into society. "Children learned their catechism, learned to pray, learned to fear sin - and their books were meant to aid and abet the process," states Morton N. Cohen in his critical biography Lewis Carroll. "They were often frightened by warnings and threats, their waking hours burdened with homilies. Much of the children's literature ... were purposeful and dour. They instilled discipline and compliance." Although the end of the century saw a trend toward educating women in subjects taught to men, such as Latin and mathematics, this change affected only a small portion of the population, specifically the upper classes.

This emphasis on manners and good breeding is reflected in Alice's adventures. She is always apologetic when she discovers she has offended someone, and she scolds the March Hare for his rude behavior. Nevertheless, Carroll seems to share the view that childhood was a golden period in a person's life. He refers in his verse preface to the novel to the "golden afternoon" that he shared with the three Miss Liddells. He also concludes the book with the prediction that Alice will someday repeat her dream of Wonderland to her own children and "feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days." On the other hand, Alice's own experiences suggest that Carroll felt that children's feelings and emotions were fully as complex as any adult emotions. By the end of the novel, she is directly contradicting adults; when she tells the Queen "Stuff and nonsense!" she is acting contrary to Victorian dictates of proper children's behavior.

***The Early Development of Children's Literature***

"Children's literature" first emerged as a genre of its own in the mid-1700s, when English bookseller John Newbery created some of the first books designed specifically to entertain children. (He is honored today in the United States by the American Library Association, who awards the annual John Newbery Medal to the best children's work of the year.) Prior to that time, works published for children were strictly educational, using stories merely to impart a moral message. If children wished to read for entertainment, they had to turn to "adult" works, such as Daniel Defoe's 1719 classic Robinson Crusoe. Despite Newbery's groundbreaking work, few works of entertainment for children appeared over the hundred years.

Most early Victorian fairy-stories and other works for children were intended to promote what contemporaries believed was "good" and "moral" behavior on the part of children. Carroll's "Alice" books take a swipe at this Victorian morality, in part through their uninhibited use of nonsense and wordplay (a favorite Victorian pastime) and in part through direct parody. Alice recalls in Chapter 1 of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland that "she had read several nice little histories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts and other unpleasant things, all because they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them." Most of the verses and poems Carroll included in the story are parodies of popular Victorian (i.e., morally uplifting) songs and ballads, twisted so that their didactic points are lost in the pleasure of wordplay.

Carroll's "Alice" books were part of a flourishing movement throughout the world to write entertaining books for children. English translations of the fairy tale collections of the German brothers Grimm first appeared in the mid-1820s. The tales of Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen appeared in English in 1846. The United States saw Louisa May Alcott's Little Women in 1868-69, part of a movement to publish realistic stories for children. In England, many noted authors for adults published works for children, including Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose 1883 work Treasure Island is considered a classic children's adventure story. The ground broken by Carroll and other children's authors of the nineteenth century led the way for today's huge market for children's books, which have their own publishers, critical scholars and journals, and librarians.

***Critical Overview***

In part because of its popularity with children and in part because of the fascination it has for adults, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has become one of the most widely interpreted pieces of literature ever produced. Victorians praised Lewis Carroll's wordplay and brilliant use of language. Critics after his death found psychological clues to Carroll's own subconscious in the book's curious dream-structure and the strange and often hostile creatures of Wonderland. During the 1960s, many young people read the book as a commentary on the contemporary drug culture. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel Through the Looking- Glass and What Alice Found There still fascinate critics, who continue to find new readings and new meanings in Carroll's stories for children.

Early reviews of the novel on its original release in 1865 concentrated on Carroll's skills at invention and his ability as a molder of words. They mentioned his parodies, his use of language, and his literary style. According to Morton N. Cohen in his critical biography Lewis Carroll, the noted poets Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti both praised the book in private letters to the author. Novelist Henry Kingsley thanked Carroll for his copy, saying "I received it in bed in the morning, and in spite of threats and persuasions, in bed I stayed until I had read every word of it. I could pay you no higher compliment ... than confessing that I could not stop reading ... till I had finished it. The fancy of the whole thing is delicious.... Your versification is a gift I envy you very much."

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was widely reviewed," notes Cohen, "and earned almost unconditional praise." Important newspapers and magazines, including the Reader and the Press commended the story's humor and its style. "The Publisher's Circular," asserts Cohen, " ... selected it as 'the most original and the most charming' of the two hundred books for children sent them that year; the Bookseller ... was 'delighted.... A more original fairy tale ... it has not lately been our good fortune to read'; and the Guardian ... judged the 'nonsense so graceful and so full of humour that one can hardly help reading it through.'" An anonymous review in the " Children's Books" section of The Athenaeum magazine (reprinted in Robert Phillips's Aspects of Alice) was an exception to the general praise the work received. The reviewer declared that "Mr. Carroll has labored hard to heap together strange adventures and heterogeneous combinations, and we acknowledge the hard labor..... We fancy that any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, overwrought story."

After Carroll's death in 1898, critics expanded the number and type of their readings of the Alice books. They analyzed the stories from many points of view - political, philosophical, metaphysical, and psychoanalytic - often evaluating the tales as products of Dodgson's neuroses and as reactions to Victorian culture. Because of the nightmarish qualities of Alice's adventures and their violent, even sadistic, elements, a few critics have suggested that the books are not really suitable for children. "We have also been bombarded by a horde of wild surmises," declares Cohen, "mostly from the psychological detectives determined to unlock deep motives in the man and to discover hidden meanings in the books. These analysts sometimes seem to be engaged in a contest to win a prize for the most outlandish reading of the texts. One such writer has proved to his satisfaction that Alice was written not by Lewis Carroll at all, but by Queen Victoria."

Some of the most well-known interpretations of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland are those that try to understand the story in light of Carroll's well-documented preference for the company of young, preteen, girls. Critics who take this approach connect Carroll's apparent inability to form an adult relationship with a woman and his artistic photographs of little girls, and conclude that Carroll was a closet pedophile - although major critics agree that there is absolutely no biographical information to support this theory. Analysts who use the theories of noted psychologist Sigmund Freud, says Cohen, "suggest that the book is about a woman in labor, that falling down the rabbit hole is an expression of Carroll's wish for coitus, that the heroine is variously a father, a mother, a fetus, or that Alice is a phallus (a theory that, at least, provides us with a rhyme)." Other readings interpret the story as about toilet training or about fallen women. "Unfortunately," Cohen concludes, "these eccentric readings, while they may amuse, do not really bring us any closer to understanding Carroll or his work."

To the extent that critics are able to agree about the meaning of the Alice books, they conclude that the stories are primarily games, stories invented by a man who loved young children and who loved to invent his own word-games and mind-puzzles. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, they agree, is the work of a lonely and brilliant man who found consolation in the company of children and tried to repay some of the debt he felt.

***Explain the background of Charles Dodgson, who wrote Alice's Adventures in Wonderland under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll.***

He explores the sources the author used in creating the novel, and examines how its major themes of growing up and finding one's identity are a reflection and product of the Victorian age.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865), Lewis Carroll's masterpiece of children's nonsense fiction, has enjoyed a life rivaled by few books from the nineteenth century, or indeed any earlier period. Alice has inspired several screen adaptations, from Disney's well-known 1951 animated feature to more "adult" versions by contemporary Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer and Playboy. It has been adapted for the stage several times, has served as the basis for countless spin-offs in the realm of fiction, and has inspired at least one well-known pop song (Jefferson Airplane's 1967 hit "White Rabbit"). Episodes from Alice and its companion piece, Through the Looking Glass (1872), have also frequently been used to illustrate problems in contemporary physics and ethics. On one level, perhaps, the reason for Alice's popularity needs no explanation: its sheer imaginative force, coupled with its blend of humor, unsentimental sweetness, and a sense of wonder, make the book unique, and likely to endure for some time. As Sir Richard Burton puts it in the "Terminal Essay" to his famous translation of The Thousand and One Nights (1886), "Every man at some turn or term of his life has longed for ... a glimpse of Wonderland."

Lewis Carroll was the pen name of the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a professor of mathematics at Christ Church, one of the colleges of Oxford University. Politically, he was conservative, "awed by lords and ladies and inclined to be snobbish toward inferiors," according to Martin Gardner in The Annotated Alice. He was also a skillful photographer (when photography was a new technology), a patron of the theater (a pastime generally discouraged by church officials at the time), and a fan of games and magic. And if "he was so shy that he could sit for hours at a social gathering and contribute nothing to the conversation, ... his shyness and stammering 'softly and suddenly vanished away' when he was alone with a child," notes Gardner.

This fondness for children, specifically young girls (he intensely disliked boys), has led to much speculation about Carroll's psychological makeup. There is little to no evidence, however, that his numerous relationships with girls were anything other than purely platonic. These relationships tended to break off after the girls passed through adolescence. A principal exception was his relationship with Alice Liddell, daughter of Henry George Liddell, dean of Christ Church. Alice in Wonderland was written at her request, and represents a record (expanded and polished) of a tale he told her one afternoon in July 1862. On this "golden afternoon" of the verse prologue, the two went rowing on the Thames River with Dodgson's friend the Reverend Robinson Duckworth and Alice's two sisters.

Much of the nonsense in Alice, as well as many incidental details, are based on things from mid-nineteenth century English life. The majority of the songs in the book are burlesques of poems and songs popular at the time, and familiar to Carroll's child audience. The last of Alice's adventures, the trial, is based on a then-familiar nursery rhyme. Another device Carroll used was creating incident out of common sayings. The character of the Cheshire Cat, for example, is based on the then-common phrase, "Grin like a Cheshire cat," while the episode of "The Mad Tea-Party" is based on two common expressions, "mad as a hatter" and "mad as a March hare." (the "madness" by which hatters were frequently afflicted was caused by prolonged exposure to mercury, used in the curing of felt, while March in England was the mating season of the hare.)

Certain more "exotic" details attest to the successful ventures of the British Empire: the flamingos, for example, pointed to missionary and colonial expansion in Africa. The hookah-smoking Caterpillar was evidence of a very profitable and still encouraged trade in opium with China; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, for example, was addicted to opium.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland can be characterized as a funhouse mirror version of a child's "journey" through the "adult" world, specifically the world of upper-class Victorian England. One of the main things that the child must grapple with on such a journey, and one of the principal themes that Alice takes up, is the question of his/her identity in that world. "Who are you?" Alice is frequently asked early in her adventures, and it is a question that she at first has a difficult time answering. Her initial erratic changes in size could be said to represent her inability to "fit" herself into this world. Her mastery of this process enables her to begin to be the master of her own destiny - to "fit," by enabling her to walk through the door that leads to the "beautiful garden," which she has wanted to enter since the beginning of her adventures.

This garden is hardly a Garden of Eden, though. Indeed, what Alice is immediately confronted with, the painting of the roses and condemnation to death of the painters by the Queen of Hearts, is an instance of the other principal of Alice: the absurdity, even insanity, of the "adult" world from the point of view of the innocent. "We're all mad here," the Cheshire Cat informs her in their famous exchange. This absurdity is frequently little more than a source of amusement to Alice; many times, though, it is a source of grief. Her treatment at the hands of the inhabitants of Wonderland, though brought upon her at times by her childish candor, is often rough, occasionally even cruel, and many times she is reduced to tears. Moreover, her adventures end with an apparent vision of the ultimate injustice of this adult world - the trial - though with her innocent frankness she is able to overcome this injustice, as her body symbolically grows to fill the courtroom.

Yet Alice is not political or social satire per se. Carroll may turn the adult world on its head, but there is no sense in the book that he is advocating any substantial changes to things as they are. Moreover, if an absurd, and even at times menacing world, Carroll's England as reflected in Wonderland is a world that can be mastered, suggesting (though some critics have contested this) that it is ultimately a benign world. Despite all the transformations she undergoes, Alice is never harmed, at least in any overt way. Indeed, her self-assured responses to the rough treatment she receives comes from the confidence - fortified by her class position - that "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world."

***Examine Carroll's emphasis on play, including its limitations.***

It was just over a hundred years ago that Through the Looking-Glass, the second of Lewis Carroll's two Alice books, was published, yet Carroll's fantasy adventures into a little girl's dream worlds have a wider, more responsive audience than they may ever have had. Looking-Glass inversions and Wonderland absurdities give us striking shorthand renditions of the language and behavior of a modern world in which it sometimes seems - to quote the Cheshire Cat - that "I'm mad. You're mad. We're all mad here." André Gregory's recent New York stage version exalted the manic potential of the Alice worlds to black humor proportions. The dry, ingenuous tone and the mix of rebellion and self-indulgence in the Alice books have been made to order for the canny, loose "youth culture" of the last few years; and the psychedelic landscapes that the Jefferson Airplane and others have discovered are stunning enough to cause some people to wonder whether shy, inhibited Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, creator of a hookah-puffing caterpillar and mushrooms that change your size, might not have been surreptitiously in the opiate tradition of Coleridge and DeQuincey.

There is no real evidence that Carroll tripped to hallucinatory worlds, but there are enough indications that Carroll was deliberately probing in the Alice books for a new adult life-style, built around a concept that is close to play, to explain their strong appeal to contemporary readers. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass have always led double lives as adult fantasy literature as well as children's classics - Katherine Anne Porter once observed that she found them, in fact, enjoyable only when she read them as an adult - but we have been inclined to look upon them largely as grownup escapes into childhood and not as attempts to define and come to new terms with adult life. William Empson has argued, for instance, that the Alice books reflect the post-Romantic feeling that "there is more in the child than any man has been able to keep." Though Empson adds that Carroll uses Alice to bring out some hard-headed and unsentimental judgments about the foolishness and even puerility of adult behavior, he apparently does not see any sustained and, one might say, "serious" attempt in the Alice books to explore the possibilities of a freer, richer adult life-style. Such a dimension seems, indeed, almost too much to expect of books that we turn to for the whimsy of talking animals, logic games, and parodies.

Yet within the Alice books are explorations of an adult life that venture as far as Carroll could risk going toward freedom from the duties, responsibilities, and arid self-limitations of modern society - and in this aspect we may discover the immediacy of their appeal to contemporary readers. Furthermore, in Carroll's ambiguous feelings toward the relatively stable middle-class society that oppressed him, and in his anxieties about the self-exposure that his nonsense barely cloaked, we discover something of the reasons why writers probing from within a culture turn predominantly to comedy - as they have done in England for a century and a half and in America for the last decade.

One of the pleasures, surely, of reading Alice in Wonderland is to witness the absurd and sometimes devastating ways in which a rather too wellbred little girl learns of the caprices of language and logic and of the alarmingly erratic tracks of her own mind. I am going to concentrate here, however, on what may be an even stronger source of its appeal to adult readers, the covert delight that we take in madcap behavior. Much of our enjoyment of all comedy lies in our realization that we, too, would like to play and carry on, just as the adult creatures of Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass do. The creatures Alice meets are clearly grown-ups (with the exception of the Tweedles) and they are engaging in pastimes whose allure would seem to be peculiarly to adults.

What a pleasant change the caucus-race would be from the competition of most "games" and adult occupations: "they began running when they liked and left off when they liked," and at the end of the race "everybody has won and all must have prizes." How nice it would be to sit, as the Mock Turtle does, on a shingle by the sea, and sentimentally ruminate on one's experiences - to surrender to all the self-indulgence that seems too rarely possible in modern life. It is always tea-time for the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse, and people they don't like just aren't invited; "No room! No room!" says the Hare. When Humpty Dumpty uses a word it means what he chooses it to mean, neither more nor less....

The exuberance of play, however, is often deliberately restrained by an arbitrary order of rules in- vented by the player, and this was especially important to Carroll . In this quality of personally devised order - the brief moments in the Alice books of creatures rehearsing their individual delights - one captures the pleasure of personal control of one's life, and perhaps achieves the stasis that so many Victorians sought in a rapidly changing world.

Even more important is the relief play brings from the officious moralizing of other people. The "moral" of Wonderland is drawn by the Duchess (although she doesn't practice it): "If everybody minded their own business, the world would go round a deal faster than it does." Victorian comic writers from Thackeray to Butler tried to fend off those ponderous forces that were bent on dictating ethical, social, and even psychological conformity. In moments of play, at least, one can operate, as Johan Huizinga has noted, "outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly ... of good and evil." In later years, Carroll could rhapsodize about his dream- Alice because she was living in the happy hours "when Sin and Sorrow are but names - empty words signifying nothing!" The homiletic hymns and rhymes that Alice tries to recall in Wonderland but cannot - "The Old Man's Comforts," "Against Idleness and Mischief," "The Sluggard," and "Speak Gently" - all share three elements: an injunction to be industrious and responsible, the reminder that we shall all grow old, and an invocation of our religious duties. Significantly, these banished thoughts are those we try to forget in play.

Carroll could not forget them for long, however, and Wonderland's imaginative projection as a possible variant life style was at the same time an opportunity to register and somehow "work out" the very anxieties that gave rise to the search for a new life style. In dreams we are often able to do all these things, and Wonderland is such a dream.

True to the dream, most things in Wonderland do not happen in a logical and chronological manner. There is no "plot" to the book; instead, dream thoughts pull seemingly disorganized elements together. Almost immediately the anxieties Carroll recorded so often in his diaries come to the surface in the behavior of the White Rabbit, who's late, who's lost his glove, who'll lose his head if he doesn't get to the Duchess' house on time. The Rabbit will later act for the Crown in the surrealistic trial of the knave at the book's end, thereby explicitly linking such social anxieties with the arbitrary punishment and the dread of fury that persistently flashes along hidden circuits of Wonderland's dreaming brain and periodically seizes Alice and the creatures. At the end of the innocuous caucus race, the Mouse tells Alice his "tale"; it is about Fury and it prefigures the terrifying dissolution of the Wonderland dream itself. According to the tale, personified Fury, who this morning has "nothing to do," imperiously decides he'll prosecute the Mouse: "'I'll be judge, I'll be jury,' said cunning old Fury; 'I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death.'"

Time and again the delights of play are cut off suddenly by such arbitrary violence, for we perceive that play by its nature cannot last. No wonder the Mad Hatter curtly changes the subject when Alice reminds him that he will soon run out of places at the tea-table. Too soon he is dragged into court by the Queen to be badgered and intimidated, despite his pathetic protest "I hadn't quite finished my tea when I was sent for." Play can only temporarily remove us from outside reality, as Carroll himself repeatedly discovered, because authority, society (characterized in those adult women - Queens and Duchesses) will interfere and impose its angry will. This is why I believe it is inaccurate to assert, as Hugh Kenner and Elizabeth Sewell have, that Carroll's books are "closed" works of art, literary game structures that are deliberately isolated and fundamentally unrelated to the Victorian social world outside them. They show, on the contrary, Carroll's reluctant conclusion that totally independent life patterns are impossible and even dangerous, and they are Carroll's paradigms of the way social power is achieved and how it operates in Victorian England.

Inherent in the very freedom of play is its weakness. Functioning by personal whim, it is potentially anarchic, thus vulnerable to the strongest, most brutal will. Halfway through the book, Alice unaccountably must enter Wonderland a second time and she finds its tenor radically different. Instead of the pleasantly free caucus race, she is in a croquet game where "the players all played at once, quarreling all the while." All order has collapsed; hedgehog balls scuttle through the grass, bodiless cats grin in the dusk. And the domineering Queen of Hearts imposes her angry will more and more as she exploits the anarchy of the hapless world of play.

The antics that the mad tea party group, the Caterpillar, and other free souls had been indulging in were, in a word, nonsense. Just as nonsense writing is a form of play activity, play itself - at least as Carroll conceived it - is nonsensical in the context of the "real world"; it has been deliberately deprived of meaning, of any overt social and moral significance. Alice noted at the tea party that "the Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English." At the trial of the knave, however, suddenly there is meaning attached to nonsensical actions and statements: it is the meaning that the autocratic Queen wants attached to them, so they can be made to serve her lust for persecution. The most damning piece of evidence, according to the Crown, is a nonsensical letter purportedly written by the defendant. Alice argues, "I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it," but the King of Hearts insists, "I seem to see some meaning in [the words] after all." The individuals who assert power in society, Carroll is suggesting, decide what things shall mean. Their whims, prompted and carried out by an irrational fury against people who would be free, dictate our responsibilities, our duties, our guilt, our sins, our punishment.

Here the adult victim's view nicely corresponds to the child's view of grown-up authority. If a child is called to task, told to remember some rule or duty he has forgotten about or never fully realized he was responsible for, he feels like the Mad Hatter, who is told "Don't be nervous, or I'll have you executed on the spot." Justice from a child's perspective often does seem to function like the Queen's: verdict first, guilt later....

The madness in the Alice books is often no more than the "looniness" of children's literature, or a harmless addlepatedness, which Alice usually absorbs with considerable aplomb. But there is a more worrisome dimension to the motif. The hallucinatory qualities of the books, the sudden metamorphoses, the wayward thoughts of cannibalism and dismemberment, the hot flashes of fury, all remind us that in dreams, especially, our minds seem to wander dangerously close to insanity. Throughout his life Carroll displayed a fascination with mental derangement. His long poem, "The Hunting of the Snark," subtitled "An Agony in Eight Fits," takes us imaginatively to the borderline of dissolution: a Baker goes out like a candle at the sight of a boojum snark. An insomniac, Carroll worked off and on at the small book of mathematical "pillow problems" to take the mind, he said, off the "undesired thoughts" that fly into the head in those late-night hours before sleep. And Carroll recorded in his diary the confusion between dream and wakefulness that makes us question our very sanity:

Query: when we are dreaming and, as often happens, have a dim consciousness of the fact and try to wake, do we not say and do things which in waking life would be insane? May we not then sometimes define insanity as an inability to distinguish which is the waking and which the sleeping life?

The psychologist Ernst Kris suggests that the venture into comedy itself is "double-edged," often carrying us near to the most unpleasant and terrifying aspects of existence and non-existence. So often do comic writers from Cervantes to the present play with insanity that we can well wonder about the standard of "common sense" prevalent in comedy; it seems at times to be an attempt to hold onto some generally agreed-upon reality.

All this is not to show that Carroll feared he would go mad, but that he was acutely conscious of the distortions of the human mind. He was preoccupied enough with the train of his own uncanny thoughts to have strong doubts about those potentially anarchic individual life styles that he concocted. He was evidently uneasy about deviation from societal norms. For this reason Alice herself acts in Wonderland and Looking-Glass as a check on the possibly manic behavior of even the "free" adult creatures like the Hatter and the Hare. She retains throughout a nice balance of self-control and imagination, which may be, in part, what made pre-adolescent little girls so attractive to Carroll. Even at her most disoriented, Alice can declare firmly that "I'm I." Though Carroll gently spoofs Alice's literal-minded common sense, she serves to remind us that no matter how appealing some of the creatures' life styles are, any sensible child her age must see it all as silly behavior by grown-ups. When the chaos and foolishness of Wonderland get out of hand at the end of the book, it is Alice who becomes the adult by growing in size and authority, and the imaginary creatures appear to be only errant children. Built into the work which vividly and alluringly explores the free behavior patterns that Carroll was attracted to is a perspective that makes it all seem puerile and pathetic, as if Carroll had doubts in his own mind about the sense (as well as the social wisdom) of that life style.

***Explain how you know that each character Alice meets in her adventures represents a part of Alice's own personality.***

Dinah is a strange figure. She is the only above-ground character whom Alice mentions repeatedly, almost always in terms of her eating some smaller animal. She seems finally to function as a personification of Alice's own subtly cannibalistic hunger, as Fury in the Mouse's tale is personified as a dog. At one point, Alice fantasizes her own identity actually blending into Dinah's:

"How queer it seems," Alice said to herself, "to be going messages for a rabbit! I suppose Dinah'll be sending me on messages next!" And she began fancying the sort of thing that would happen: "Miss Alice! Come here directly, and get ready for your walk!" "Coming in a minute, nurse! But I've got to watch this mousehole till Dinah comes back, and see that the mouse doesn't get out."

While Dinah is always in a predatory attitude, most of the Wonderland animals are lugubrious victims; together, they encompass the two sides of animal nature that are in Alice as well. But as she falls down the rabbit hole, Alice senses the complicity between eater and eaten, looking-glass versions of each other:

"Dinah, my dear! I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I'm afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that's very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?" And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" and sometimes, "Do bats eat cats?" for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't matter which way she put it.

We are already half-way to the final banquet of Looking-Glass, in which the food comes alive and begins to eat the guests.

Even when Dinah is not mentioned, Alice's attitude toward the animals she encounters is often one of casual cruelty. It is a measure of Dodgson's ability to flatten out Carroll's material that the prefatory poem could describe Alice "in friendly chat with bird or beast," or that he would later see Alice as "loving as a dog ... gentle as a fawn." She pities Bill the Lizard and kicks him up the chimney, a state of mind that again looks forward to that of the Pecksniffian Walrus in Looking-Glass. When she meets the Mock Turtle, the weeping embodiment of a good Victorian dinner, she restrains herself twice when he mentions lobsters, but then distorts Isaac Watt's Sluggard into a song about a baked lobster surrounded by hungry sharks. In its second stanza, a Panther shares a pie with an Owl who then becomes dessert, as Dodgson's good table manners pass into typical Carrollian cannibalism. The more sinister and Darwinian aspects of animal nature are introduced into Wonderland by the gentle Alice, in part through projections of her hunger onto Dinah and the "nice little dog" (she meets a "dear little puppy" after she has grown small and is afraid he will eat her up) and in part through the semi-cannibalistic appetite her songs express. With the exception of the powerful Cheshire Cat, whom I shall discuss below; most of the Wonderland animals stand in some danger of being exploited or eaten. The Dormouse is their prototype: he is fussy and cantankerous, with the nastiness of a self-aware victim, and he is stuffed into a teapot as the Mock Turtle, sobbing out his own elegy, will be stuffed into a tureen.

Alice's courteously menacing relationship to these animals is more clearly brought out in Alice's Adventures under Ground, in which she encounters only animals until she meets the playing cards, who are lightly sketched-in versions of their later counterparts. When expanding the manuscript for publication, Carroll added the Frog Footman, Cook, Duchess, Pig-Baby, Cheshire Cat, Mad Hatter, March Hare, and Dormouse, as well as making the Queen of Hearts a more fully developed character than she was in the manuscript. In other words, all the human or quasi-human characters were added in revision, and all develop aspects of Alice that exist only under the surface of her dialogue. The Duchess' household also turns inside out the domesticated Wordsworthian ideal: with baby and pepper flung about indiscriminately, pastoral tranquility is inverted into a whirlwind of savage sexuality. The furious Cook embodies the equation between eating and killing that underlies Alice's apparently innocent remarks about Dinah. The violent Duchess' unctuous search for "the moral" of things echoes Alice's own violence and search for "the rules." At the Mad Tea Party, the Hatter extends Alice's "great interest in questions of eating and drinking" into an insane modus vivendi; like Alice, the Hatter and the Duchess sing savage songs about eating that embody the underside of Victorian literary treacle. The Queen's croquet game magnifies Alice's own desire to cheat at croquet and to punish herself violently for doing so. Its use of live animals may be a subtler extension of Alice's own desire to twist the animal kingdom to the absurd rules of civilization, which seem to revolve largely around eating and being eaten. Alice is able to appreciate the Queen's savagery so quickly because her size changes have made her increasingly aware of who she, herself, is from the point of view of a Caterpillar, a Mouse, a Pigeon, and, especially, a Cheshire Cat.

The Cheshire Cat, also a late addition to the book, is the only figure other than Alice who encompasses all the others. William Empson [in Some Versions of Pastoral, 1950] discusses at length the spiritual kinship between Alice and the Cat, the only creature in Wonderland whom she calls her "friend." Florence Becker Lennon [in The Life of Lewis Carroll, 1962], refers to the Cheshire Cat as " Dinah's dream-self" and we have noticed the subtle shift of identities between Alice and Dinah throughout the story. The Cat shares Alice's equivocal placidity: "The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had very long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt it ought to be treated with respect." The Cat is the only creature to make explicit the identification between Alice and the madness of Wonderland: "'... we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad. "How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice. 'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.' Alice didn't think that proved it at all...." Although Alice cannot accept it and closes into silence, the Cat's remark may be the answer she has been groping toward in her incessant question, "who am I?" As an alter ego, the Cat is wiser than Alice - and safer - because he is the only character in the book who is aware of his own madness. In his serene acceptance of the fury within and without, his total control over his appearance and disappearance, he almost suggests a post-analytic version of the puzzled Alice.

As Alice dissolves increasingly into Wonderland, so the Cat dissolves into his own head, and finally into his own grinning mouth. The core of Alice's nature, too, seems to lie in her mouth: the eating and drinking that direct her size changes and motivate much of her behavior, the songs and verses that pop out of her inadvertently, are all involved with things entering and leaving her mouth. Alice's first song introduces a sinister image of a grinning mouth. Our memory of the Crocodile's grin hovers over the later description of the Cat's "grin without a Cat," and colors our sense of Alice's infallible good manners:

How cheerfully he seems to grin,  
How neatly spreads his claws,  
And welcomes little fishes in,  
With gently smiling jaws!...

When the Duchess' Cook abruptly barks out "Pig!" Alice thinks the word is meant for her, though it is the baby, another fragment of Alice's own nature, who dissolves into a pig. The Mock Turtle's lament for his future soupy self later blends tellingly into the summons for the trial: the lament of the eaten and the call to judgment melt together. When she arrives at the trial, the unregenerate Alice instantly eyes the tarts: "In the very middle of the court was a table, with a large dish of tarts upon it: they looked so good, that it made Alice quite hungry to look at them - 'I wish they'd get the trial done,' she thought, 'and hand round the refreshments!'" Her hunger links her to the hungry Knave who is being sentenced: in typically ambiguous portmanteau fashion, Carroll makes the trial both a pre-Orwellian travesty of justice and an objective correlative of a real sense of sin. Like the dog Fury in the Mouse's tale, Alice takes all the parts. But unlike Fury, she is accused as well as accuser, melting into judge, jury, witness, and defendant; the person who boxes on the ears as well as the person who "cheats." Perhaps the final verdict would tell Alice who she is at last, but if it did, Wonderland would threaten to overwhelm her. Before it comes, she "grows"; the parts of her nature rush back together; combining the voices of victim and accuser, she gives "a little scream, half of fright and half of anger," and wakes up.

Presented from the point of view of her older sister's sentimental pietism, the world to which Alice awakens seems far more dream-like and hazy than the sharp contours of Wonderland. Alice's lesson about her own identity has never been stated explicitly for the stammerer Dodgson was able to talk freely only in his private language of puns and nonsense, but a Wonderland pigeon points us toward it:

"You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!""I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.""I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say." This was such a new idea to Alice, that she was quite silent for a minute or two ...

Like so many of her silences throughout the book, Alice's silence here is charged with significance, reminding us again that an important technique in learning to read Carroll is our ability to interpret his private system of symbols and signals and to appreciate the many meanings of silence. In this scene, the golden child herself becomes the serpent in childhood's Eden. The eggs she eats suggest the woman she will become, the unconscious cannibalism involved in the very fact of eating and desire to eat, and finally, the charmed circle of childhood itself. Only in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was Carroll able to fall all the way through the rabbit hole to the point where top and bottom become one, bats and cats melt into each other, and the vessel of innocence and purity is also the source of inescapable corruption.