***Through the Looking Glass***

***Chapter 5***

***Wool And Water***

***Summary:***

* Alice returns the shawl to its owner, the White Queen, who comes running along behind it. She tries to help the Queen put the shawl back on and straighten her untidy hair which has the brush caught in it.
* Alice remarks that the White Queen seems to need a lady's maid. The White Queen offers the job to Alice, but they get confused about terms. The White Queen offers jam every other day, and Alice is confused because this seems to mean it's never the day for the jam.
* The White Queen tells Alice that the confusion comes from living backwards. She explains that, in Looking-Glass World, effects happen before causes. For example, the King's messenger is in prison now, his trial begins on Wednesday, and after that he'll commit the crime.
* Alice asks what would happen if the messenger never committed the crime at all. The White Queen says that would be even better.
* Suddenly the Queen starts screaming and shaking her hand, saying that her finger is bleeding. After this, she pricks her finger on the pin of her brooch. Then she's fine. The pain came before the accident, because things happen backwards.
* Alice begins to feel lonely and starts crying. The White Queen encourages her to stop crying by considering things. She asks Alice's age, and Alice says she's seven and a half. The Queen says she is 101 years old, plus five months and a day.
* Alice can't believe the Queen's age. The Queen says she used to practice believing impossible things when she was young.
* The White Queen's shawl is blown away on another gust of wind, and she runs after it and catches it.
* Alice says she hopes the Queen's finger is better. As they're walking, they cross a little brook, and as the Queen repeats the word "better," it turns into a bleat. She has transformed into a sheep, and they are in the Fifth Square.
* The Sheep, who sits at a counter knitting, is a shopkeeper. Alice looks around the shop, but it's hard to tell what is being sold because things keep moving around.
* Alice begins to stare at the Sheep, who is knitting with fourteen pairs of needles at once. She gives a pair to Alice and asks if Alice can row.
* Alice says she can't row on land with needles, but before she has finished explaining, she finds herself in a boat holding oars. The Sheep keeps telling her to feather so she doesn't catch a crab. Alice thinks she is talking about a literal feather and the animal crab, but of course these are rowing terms: feathering is what you do with the oars in the water, and a crab is when one of the oars gets stuck in a strong eddy and pulled out of your hand.
* The boat drifts among some beautiful scented rushes. Alice picks as many as she can, but the most beautiful ones are always out of reach.
* One of the oars gets stuck in the water and the end of it catches Alice under the chin. She is thrown to the bottom of the boat, but she doesn't get hurt. The Sheep says that Alice caught a crab, but Alice still thinks she means the animal.
* The Sheep asks Alice what she wants to buy, and Alice realizes they are back in the shop. Alice asks to buy an egg and somehow finds the money in her pocket to pay for it.
* The Sheep sets the egg down at one end of the shop and tells Alice to go get it herself. As Alice walks toward the egg, it seems further and further away. She finds herself walking through a wood. Then she crosses a brook, and – you know what that means – she's in the Sixth Square!

***Synopsis:***

As Alice runs through the forest, she comes across a shawl blowing about in front of her. She grabs the shawl and bumps into the White Queen, who has been chasing through the wood after her missing shawl. In thanks, the White Queen offers Alice a job as her maid, promising “twopence a week, and jam every other day.” Alice respectfully declines. The White Queen tells Alice that she lives backward and remembers events before they happen. She goes on to inform Alice that the King’s Messenger will be in prison the week after next, that his trial begins next Wednesday, and that his crime will come last of all. As the two discuss the merits of punishment for a crime that may not be committed, the White Queen starts screaming like an engine whistle. She tells Alice she will prick her finger, and then pricks it as she refastens her shawl.

Alice feels lonely and begins to cry. The White Queen cheers her up by telling her to consider things such as her age before admitting that she is over one hundred years old. When Alice states that to live to a hundred is impossible, the White Queen counters that Alice cannot believe the impossible because she has not had any practice. The White Queen’s shawl blows away again, and she chases after it over a brook. As Alice crosses the brook to catch up with her, the White Queen transforms into a sheep, and Alice finds herself suddenly in a shop.

The Sheep asks Alice what she would like to buy and Alice begins looking around the shop. Though filled with curious items, every shelf that Alice sets her eyes upon appears to be empty. The Sheep then tells Alice she must begin “feathering,” which means rowing. Alice looks around and finds herself in a boat with the Sheep on a river. Alice rows until the boat reaches sweet-scented rushes, which she pulls up from the water and lays at her feet. She begins rowing again, but the oar gets caught, jarring the boat so that Alice falls down to the floor of the boat. When she stands up again, Alice finds herself back in the shop, where the Sheep asks her again what she would like to buy. Alice pays for an egg, which the Sheep places on a shelf for her. Every time Alice moves toward the egg on the shelf, it seems to get progressively farther away from her. She continues to walk toward the egg as the shop transforms back into the wood.

***Brief Analysis:***

Time moves backward in Looking-Glass World, further challenging the assumption that people have control over the choices they make. Time does not move backward toward a final point of origin. Instead, characters move forward while the order of events moves backward. The White Queen illustrates this principle by explaining that the King’s Messenger will be sentenced before he commits his crime. Her wounds heal and she experiences pain before she becomes injured. All of the characters, the White Queen included, “remember” both the past and the future. They have knowledge of events before they happen, which reinforces the deterministic aspect of Looking-Glass World. Causal relationships are inverted, so that every effect experienced leads back to a cause that eventually occurs. Characters commit actions for which they have already experienced the consequences. Because of this, the concept of free will in Looking-Glass World becomes tenuous at best.

As the White Queen attempts to cheer Alice up, she points some of the arbitrary conventions that Alice lives by. The White Queen chastises Alice for refusing to believe that she is over a hundred years old on the grounds that it is “impossible.” Alice does not know what is possible in this fantasy world, especially since her adventures thus far have repeatedly challenged her preconceived expectation. Even under the assumption that Alice’s doubts are justified, the White Queen’s claim to be a hundred years old is not impossible, merely unlikely. Regardless, Alice should know by now that individuals in Looking-Glass World are capable of doing the impossible.

***Critical Study:***

[Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice) catches a shawl that happens to belong the White Queen. The White Queen is just as rumpled as the Red King, and Alice finds that conversing with her is extremely confusing. When Alice comments on the Queen's bedraggled state of dress, the Queen tries to employ her. They get into an argument about the mode of pay; the Queen claims that one gets paid in jam every other day, but never today, though Alice insists that at some point it will have to be today.

The Queen also argues that the backwards way of living is best, because one's memory works in both directions. Alice tries to convince her that prosecuting a crime before it has happened is not right, but the queen argues that the punishment is good for the person apprehended. She puts on a bandaid and screams because she anticipates pricking her finger while refastening her brooch, and indeed, after fumbling with it, she pricks her finger.

Alice suddenly becomes sad because she feels so alone in the woods. The Queen tries to console her by getting her to consider something else, anything else, and Alice finds that she is laughing at what the Queen is asking her to think about. The Queen insists that Alice should practice thinking about impossible things, and the two jump across the next brook together.

Alice finds herself in a dark shop with a sheep behind the counter. The sheep encourages her to make up her mind about what she is going to purchase, but Alice asks for time to look around before making up her mind. But when she tries to peruse the shelves, there is never anything on the shelf she is looking at.

She discovers that the sheep is knitting with 14 pairs of needles. The sheep asks her if she can row, and she says that she could only do so in water, and then she finds herself in a boat with the sheep. She notices some beautiful rushes and picks some, but their beauty fades once they are in the boat.

She suddenly finds herself in the shop again with the sheep asking what she wants, and when she asks for an egg, the sheep places it on the shelf. She is convinced that it is not a good policy to put things directly into a person's hand. When Alice reaches for the egg, it just moves farther away from her, and soon everything she approaches becomes a tree.

In this chapter, the White Queen proposes the notion of "living backwards." Alice thinks this is a preposterous idea. The White Queen goes on to argue that one who is living backwards has a memory that functions in both directions, and that this is the optimal way of functioning.

This relates to Jan Gordon's hypothesis about Victorian literature and its presentation of childhood. The Victorian era was a difficult one for the notion of childhood. Many laws that previously applied only to adults were applied to children. Additionally, laws that specifically protected children were removed. Further, the thinking that madness was actually a state of perpetuated childhood began to develop.

Gordon proposes that because of this, the line between childhood and adulthood began to blur, especially in literature. The reader notices that the White Queen, and all the other "adult" characters in the book, do not really act like adults. They indulge in childhood fantasies, and Alice is left the burden of providing logical responses and make sensible decisions.

Alice's situation reflects that of children in her era. Carroll was probably attempting in his literature to capture the problem of children being forced to grow up too fast, just like J.M Barrie in [Peter Pan](https://www.gradesaver.com/peter-pan). Alice has not parental role models for guidance on her journey, so she is forced to learn quickly and act the adult herself. Otherwise, she has no chance of reaching the eighth square.

There are a couple hypotheses about the dream-rushes and what they are meant to represent. It is possible that they are symbols of the author's child friends. The best are always out of reach. It is also possible that they represent the transience of youth and beauty, because once picked and held in hand, they quickly fade.

Alice's ability to balance an egg on its end on a flat surface alludes to Columbus' supposed accomplishment of the same feat. It might refer to an old gambling game in which the objective was to be the last person to place an egg on a napkin already crowded with eggs. None of the other eggs can be touched, and the winning strategy involves placing the first egg on its end in the very center. Many solutions to the egg-on-its-end problem have been proposed, including cracking it slightly on the bottom, shaking it so that the contents are dispersed and the center of gravity changes, etc.

***Critical Analysis:***

[Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Alice) catches the shawl, which belongs to the [White Queen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#White_Queen). Alice then helps straighten the White Queen's shawl and hair. In return the White Queen says she'll hire Alice as her servant and pay her "two pence a week, and jam every other day." Alice laughs and refuses the offer, adding she doesn't like jam. In the ensuing conversation, the Queen explains that "living backward" is initially confusing: effects happen before their causes. This is exemplified by the Queen crying out and wanting a bandage *before* she is injured.

The White Queen consoles Alice, who is sad because she is so lonely. The queen says, "Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come today. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, only don't cry!" Her words both comfort and amuse Alice, who laughs.

The queen also advises Alice on the importance of believing: "'There's no use trying,' [Alice] said: 'one can't believe impossible things.'" The queen points out that Alice obviously hasn't had much practice, and she herself did so "for half-an-hour each day" at Alice's age. "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast," she says.

Then the shawl flies away again, but this time the Queen catches it. While the two are crossing a brook, Alice notices the Queen's voice change to a bleat.

The White Queen has transformed into a sheep, and Alice and the Sheep are in a shop. The Sheep is knitting and wearing glasses. Alice turns around and around in the shop, and suddenly, they are in a boat. The Sheep gives Alice a pair of knitting needles, which turn into oars. The Sheep continues to offer aid, this time in the way of advice: "'Feather! Feather!' the Sheep cried again, taking more needles. 'You'll be catching a crab directly.'" The Sheep makes several references to feathers and crabs, terms that relate to rowing, not to birds or crustaceans.

After their unexpected rowing trip, they are back in the shop where Alice buys an egg.

[Alice](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Alice)'s encounter with the [White Queen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#White_Queen) again mixes nonsense and reality. The concept of living a life in reverse is comical. However, within this same conversation, there is a wise bit of advice to readers and to Alice herself. The queen counters Alice's feelings of loneliness by pointing out how far she's come. This simple statement can be either literal (Alice has traveled through four squares already) or figurative (Alice has overcome obstacles and succeeded in multiple ways). Those victories are worth cherishing. When combined with the notion of believing in "impossible things," this is powerful advice.

The White Queen may appear less coherent than the [Red Queen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#Red_Queen), especially because of her habit of living backward, but she is a character who is in power, and functioning independently—as will be seen when the [White King](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/character-analysis/#White_King) chooses not to rescue her from what he presumes are "enemies" in [Chapter 7](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/chapter-7-summary/). Much like the interaction with Tweedledum and Tweedledee in [Chapter 4](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Through-the-Looking-Glass/chapter-4-summary/), reality is mixed in with the nonsense. The White Queen offers useful advice for children, especially young girls: she has accomplished things by believing in "impossible things." Unlike the kings in the story, the queens strive and succeed. Moreover, she tells Alice to practice believing and to take stock of your victories. This mindset is powerful. Returning to the chess game aspect of the novel, it is particularly important that this advice is coming from the White Queen. In chess, she is the character in opposition to the Red Queen. As the match proceeds, Alice will also be in opposition to the Red Queen. So the character that is in the role Alice will assume—her predecessor and ally on the chess board—is advising her not to give up.

The second part of this chapter is more nonsensical. The Sheep wears glasses, sells things in a shop, and when the setting changes—in a very dreamlike way—the Sheep makes continued remarks about rowing, a sort of in-joke Alice doesn't understand. Both "feather" and "crab" are not literally meant. To feather is to turn the oar so it is parallel to the water's surface. When a rower "catches a crab," the oar is trapped in the water by the boat's momentum and the oar handle may fly backward, striking the rower in the chest.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) catches the shawl and sees the [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) running toward her. Alice helps the queen put her shawl back on and, as the queen repeats "bread-and-butter," Alice tries to make conversation. She asks if she's addressing the White Queen, but the queen laments in reply that she wouldn't call this "a-dressing." Not wanting to argue, Alice asks for guidance so she can help. She notices that the queen's clothing and hair are very untidy and offers to straighten the queen's shawl. Alice gently puts the queen's clothes back in order and laughs when the queen offers to hire her as a lady's maid for twopence per week and jam every other day.

***Analysis Part 1:***

In this instance, Alice looks far more adult than the White Queen does—losing articles of clothing like this is usually something that's more common for children to do than adults. When Alice has to act like the adult, it suggests that adults are actually not as competent as children like Alice might think—they need help too, and may be just as lost in the world as someone who's young like Alice.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) turns down the job and says she doesn't like jam. The [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) points out that Alice can't have the jam anyway—she can only have jam tomorrow and yesterday, but never today. Alice is confused, but the queen kindly explains that when one lives backwards, as she does, one can remember in both directions. Even more confused, Alice asks what the queen remembers. The White Queen says that now, there's a messenger who's being punished. His trial begins next week and he'll commit the crime last. Alice asks what happens if the messenger never commits the crime, and the queen says that'd be great. They argue about the purpose of punishment and the queen suggests that punishments are even better when a person hasn't committed a crime.

***Analysis Part 2:***

That the queen can remember in both directions (and not just the future, as one might suspect given the rules the Red Queen laid out for Looking-glass World) is another indicator that Looking-glass World doesn't function like Alice thinks it should: the rules don't apply evenly and instead they apply in every direction at various times. The argument about the purpose of punishment starts to pick at Victorian beliefs about how to raise and punish children. Alice has a far more sensible view of punishment than the queen does, suggesting that children can have a more defined sense of right and wrong than the adults in charge.

***Summary Part 3:***

Before [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) can suggest that they've made a mistake in their logic, the [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) starts screaming that her finger is bleeding. The queen explains that she's going to prick it on her brooch. The queen's shawl flies open and though Alice tries to save the day, the White Queen catches the brooch and pricks her finger. Calmly, the White Queen says that it should all make sense to Alice now and when Alice asks why she's not screaming, the queen says she already did that.

***Analysis Part 3:***

This scene suggests that the logic of Looking-glass World is actually more straightforward than previously acknowledged, even if it still doesn't make sense to Alice: The progression of events makes perfect sense in a world that functions backwards. However, that this doesn't apply across the board still means that Alice struggles to figure out how things work and when they work this way or not.

***Summary Part 4:***

The sky begins to get light and [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) observes that the crow flew away. She says she's glad, and the [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) moans that she wishes she could be happy. Alice remembers that she's actually very lonely and starts to cry. The White Queen tells Alice to consider anything to stop crying. She asks how old Alice is and then admits that she's 105 years, 5 months, and 1 day. Alice laughs and says she can't believe things that are impossible. The queen declares that Alice needs practice. Her shawl flies off again and the queen races after it across a brook. Alice follows.

***Analysis part 4:***

Alice's insistence that she can't believe impossible things makes it clear that while she may be an imaginative child, her imagination still has limits—she's not entirely comfortable accepting the nonsensical nature of this world unquestioningly, even if this world is a figment of her imagination. In other words, she's still trying to make this world make logical sense, something that the novel suggests is a futile endeavor.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) asks if the [White Queen](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen)'s finger is better but, as the queen answers, Alice finds herself in a dark shop with a [Sheep](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-sheep) knitting behind the counter. The Sheep asks Alice what she'd like to buy. Alice says she wants to look around before she makes a decision. The sheep points out that Alice can look in many directions, but she can't look all around unless she has eyes in the back of her head. Alice turns to study the shelves. They seem to be full of interesting things but when Alice looks directly at a shelf, it's always empty. In pursuit of something bright, Alice "chases" the object to the top shelf and right through the ceiling. The Sheep tells Alice to stop making her dizzy and Alice notes that the Sheep is knitting with 14 pairs of needles.

***Analysis Part 5:***

The Sheep's insistence on semantics and the literal meaning of looking all around shows that in this situation, Alice isn't the one who's being the most logical and literal—part of understanding how language works is understanding that it can mean something more than what the words themselves mean on the surface. This is another case in which Alice will need to work hard to adapt in order to get along with this Sheep and make it through this portion of the chessboard.

***Summary Part 6:***

The [Sheep](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-sheep) hands [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) a pair of knitting needles and asks if Alice can row. Alice begins to answer but discovers that the needles have turned into oars and she and the Sheep are in a little boat. The Sheep shouts, "Feather!" but Alice, perplexed, doesn't answer. Her oars occasionally get stuck and the Sheep continues to shout "Feather!" and says that Alice will soon catch a crab. This thought delights Alice, but hearing "Feather" over and over again begins to annoy her. She points out that she's not a bird, but the Sheep calls her a goose.

***Analysis Part 6:***

"Feather" is a rowing term that refers to holding the oars parallel to the water while they're above the water—and if a rower feathers too soon, they'll "catch a crab," or get the oar stuck. Alice doesn't understand this, so readers familiar with the terminology can laugh at her expense. Again, language can be expansive and mean many different things, which allows for all sorts of jokes depending on what a person does or doesn't know.

***Summary Part 7:***

[Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) notices beautiful scented [rushes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/rushes) ahead and asks if they can stop and pick some. The [Sheep](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-sheep) insists it has nothing to do with whether or not the boat stops. Alice stops rowing and the boat drifts into the rushes. She begins to pluck the rushes but realizes, to her annoyance, that the prettiest rushes seem just a little further away than she can reach. The narrator notes that Alice doesn't notice that the rushes in the boat wilt and melt almost immediately. She rows on until one oar gets stuck and won't move. The oar sweeps Alice off her seat, but Alice manages to sort herself out. The Sheep compliments her on catching a crab. Alice cautiously says she would've liked to see the crab, but the Sheep just laughs at her.

***Analysis part 7:***

When the most beautiful rushes are those that are furthest away, it symbolizes how children idealize adulthood and think that the future looks far brighter than their present—while the wilting rushes in Alice's boat stand for how it's so hard for anyone to tell in the moment that they're getting older and changing. The rushes more broadly represent childhood and the way that children, in Carroll's view, don't necessarily know how good they have it until they're already adults and it's too late to go back.

***Summary part 8:***

The [Sheep](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-sheep) asks [Alice](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) what she wants to buy and suddenly they're back in the dark shop. Alice asks for an egg and the Sheep explains that they sell two for less money than one, but Alice has to eat them both if she buys two. Alice decides to buy one and gives the Sheep money. The Sheep says that she never puts things in other people's hands, sets the egg on a shelf, and walks away. Alice walks toward the egg but the shop seems to expand. She notices branches and crosses a little brook.

***Analysis Part 8:***

The Sheep's price system is just as silly as anything else in the novel. Alice has to make a choice about whether to argue or whether to go with it. Choosing to go with it suggests that Alice is getting better at adapting, while her lack of fear or suspicion as the shop expands supports this and shows that she's open to experiencing these kinds of strange occurrences.