***Through the Looking Glass***

***Theme and Analysis***

***Characters:***

***The red Queen:***

The Red Queen behaves like the quintessential Victorian governess. She is overbearing, meticulously obsessive about manners, and civil in a self-righteous and supercilious way. Like the vast majority of the characters in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Red Queen makes definitive statements with little regard for an abiding logic that would support them. Her assertions are often arbitrary recitations of strict behavioral advice, such as, “Speak when you’re spoken to!” When Alice reveals the inadequacy of the logic behind the Red Queen’s statements, the Red Queen asserts her arbitrary position of authority as a justification. The Red Queen’s constant badgering of and competition with Alice indicates profound feelings of antagonism. She fits into the framework of Alice’s dream as representative arbitrary authority, serving as a caricature of an overbearing governess figure at odds with her young charges.

***The White Knight:***

Carroll modeled the character of the White Knight after himself, and the White Knight’s compassionate behavior toward Alice demonstrates Carroll’s feelings toward the real-life Alice Liddell. Like the White Knight, Carroll had shaggy hair, blue eyes, and a mild face. Also like Carroll, the White Knight has a penchant for inventing and compulsively preparing for any kind of contingency, no matter how ridiculous. The White Knight sweeps in at a moment of crisis to rescue Alice from the clutches of the Red Knight, before he helpfully escorts her to the point at which she no longer needs protection and can claim her new title of queen. As he guides her, he sings a song that conjures up feelings of wistful longing, calling attention to the idea of Alice’s transformation into a queen as a metaphor for her sexual awakening into womanhood. The White Knight represents a figure from her childhood who can bring her to the point at which she reaches adulthood before he must let go. The scene between the White Knight and Alice is marked by feelings of nostalgia tinged with regret, since Alice must eventually leave the White Knight and claim her new role alone.

### Chess as Metaphor for Fate

Alice’s journey through Looking-Glass World is guided by a set of rigidly constructed rules that guide her along her path to a preordained conclusion. Within the framework of the chess game, Alice has little control over the trajectory of her life, and outside forces influence her choices and actions. Just as Alice exerts little control of her movement toward becoming a queen, she has no power over her inevitable maturation and acceptance of womanhood. At the beginning of the game, Alice acts as a pawn with limited perspective of the world around her. She has limited power to influence outcomes and does not fully understand the rules of the game, so an unseen hand guides her along her journey, constructing different situations and encounters that push her along toward her goal. Though she wants to become a queen, she must follow the predetermined rules of the chess game, and she frequently discovers that every step she takes toward her goal occurs because of outside forces acting upon her, such as the mysterious train ride and her rescue by the White Knight. By using the chess game as the guiding principle of the narrative, Carroll suggest that a larger force guides individuals through life and that all events are preordained. In this deterministic concept of life, free will is an illusion and individual choices are bound by rigidly determined rules and guided by an overarching, unseen force.

### Language as a Means to Order the World

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, language has the capacity to anticipate and even cause events to happen. Alice recites nursery rhymes on several occasions, which causes Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Humpty Dumpty, and the Lion and the Unicorn to perform the actions that she describes in her rhymes. Rather than recording and describing events that have already happened, words give rise to actions simply by being spoken. Tweedledum and Tweedledee’s quarrel begins only after Alice recites the rhyme about the broken rattle. Similarly, Humpty Dumpty’s fall does not happen until Alice describes the events in the classic nursery rhyme. Language covers actions in Looking-Glass World, rather than simply describing them. The flowers reinforce this principle by explaining that a tree can scare enemies away with its “bark.” In our language, there is no relationship between the bark of a dog and the bark of a tree, but in Looking-Glass World, this linguistic similarity results in a functional common ground. Trees that have bark are thus able to “bark” just as fiercely as dogs.

### The Loneliness of Growing Up

Throughout her adventures, Alice feels an inescapable sense of loneliness from which she can find no relief. Before she enters Looking-Glass World, her only companions are her cats, to whom she attributes human qualities to keep her company. Once she enters Looking-Glass World, she seeks compassion and understanding from the individuals that she meets, but she is frequently disappointed. The flowers and Humpty Dumpty treat her rudely, the Red Queen is brusque, and the Fawn flees from her once it realizes that she is a human. She receives little compassion from others and often becomes sad. The one character who shows her compassion is the White Knight, who must leave her when she reaches the eighth square and must take on her role of Queen. Alice’s dreams deal with the anxieties of growing up and becoming a young woman. Since Alice believes that loneliness is an inherent part of growing up, even in her dreams she must face the transition into womanhood alone.

### *Motifs:* Inverse Reflections

Many of the basic assumptions that Alice makes about her environment are reversed in Looking-Glass World. Outcomes precede events, cakes are passed out before being cut, destinations are reached by walking in the opposite direction, and characters remember the future and think best while standing on their heads. These strange phenomena challenge the way Alice thinks and in some cases expose the arbitrary nature of her understanding of her own world. Many of Alice’s experiences exist as meaningless parodies of aspects of her own familiar world back home. Alice becomes aware of a new, inverted perspective on life as she travels forward and backward through Looking-Glass World.

### Dream

Alice falls asleep at the beginning of *Through the Looking-Glass*, just as she did at the outset of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, so that the resulting fantastical adventures occur in her dreams. The story follows Alice through the various episodes of Looking-Glass World so that we experience her adventures through her impressions of Looking-Glass House, the chess game, and her quest to become a queen. The characters and scenes that she encounters exist as a combination of her memories and impressions of the waking world and the random, illogical inventions of her dreaming mind. Carroll emphasizes the dream motif by basing some of the denizens of Looking-Glass World on individuals from the life of his real-life muse, Alice Liddell. For example, the Red Queen is based on Alice’s governess Miss Prickett, while the White Knight is closely based upon Lewis Carroll himself.

### Chess

The chess game that Alice participates in becomes the organizing mechanism for her adventure in Looking-Glass World. Alice’s journey closely follows the rules of a traditional game of chess. The perspectives and movements of the individual characters correspond to the movements of their respective chess pieces. The Red and White Queens have an unlimited view of the board, since queens can move in any direction and as many spaces as they want in a single turn. The Red and White Kings can only move one space at a time in any direction, so while they have the same perspective as the queens, they have limited mobility. This limitation explains why the White King cannot follow the White Queen as she runs away from the other chessmen, since she moves “too fast.” As a pawn, Alice can only move forward once space at a time, with the exception of her first move, in which she can move two spaces. Like a pawn, Alice can only “see” one square ahead of her. When she reaches the final square and becomes a queen, she can “see” the whole board because now she has the full mobility of the queen chess piece. Alice’s move to take the Red Queen results in a checkmate of the Red King, ending the chess game and causing Alice to wake up.

### Train Imagery

Trains and train imagery appear frequently to underscore the feeling of unstoppable forward motion that governs Alice’s journey toward womanhood. The Red King’s somnolent snoring resembles a train engine, while the White Queen screams like a train whistle before she pricks her finger. Alice skips forward several spaces when she finds herself unexpectedly on a train, shooting through the forest toward her destination and mimicking Alice’s forward movement as a pawn in the chess game. The train imagery suggests the irreversible and unstoppable movement toward adulthood that Alice becomes subject to in her journey through Looking-Glass World.

### *Symbols:* The Rushes

The rushes that Alice pulls from the water in Chapter 5 represent dreams. Rushes are plans that grow in riverbeds and poke through the surface of the water. The rapid fading of the rushes’ sweet scene after being picked corresponds to the fleetingness of the memory of a dream after a person wakes up.

### The Sleeping Red King

Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell Alice that she is only a creation of the Red King’s dream, which implies that Looking-Glass World is not a construction of Alice’s dream. The Red King becomes a divine figure who dreams up all of Alice’s adventures, fostering the idea that she does not actually have any identity or agency beyond what she is allowed in the context of the dream. The idea that we are all just aspects of the dream of a divine power comes from Bishop Berkeley, a philosopher who wrote during Carroll’s lifetime and who believed that man and the universe exist as part of God’s imagination.

In what way does chess in *Through the Looking‑Glass* suggest a deterministic conception of life?

The motif of the chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass* suggests the presence of an intelligent force that exists outside of the world of the chessboard, guiding the actions of Alice and the other characters according to the rules of the game of chess. As the author of the story, Carroll becomes the intelligent force that bends the character’s actions to his will. As a result, the character’s perception of individual free will exists as an illusion. Alice exemplifies this determinism when she arbitrarily changes her mind from seeing the bee‑like elephants in favor of moving along the course laid out by the Red Queen. This moment of self restraint is atypical of the insatiably curious Alice, but her decision seems unconvincing. Carroll’s hand as author and “chess player” emerges here, as he bars Alice from becoming sidetracked from her prescribed goal. As Alice begins walking the path of the pawn, moving directly from square to square, she loses the profound sense of curiosity that might potentially lead her astray. Alice’s resolve to complete the game demonstrates the role of determinism in the story, for Alice’s actions are not her own but stem from the will of a guiding force.

***About Through the Looking Glass:***is Carroll's sequel to [*Alice in Wonderland*](https://www.gradesaver.com/alice-in-wonderland). A few of the characters who appeared in Wonderland reappear in Through the Looking Glass, including [Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice)'s cat and the Hatter and the Hare. More significantly, however, is the way in which the sequel mirrors the first book: it begins inside on a snowy November 4, while Wonderland began outside on a sunny May 4; it employs the imagery of chess where Wonderland employs the imagery of playing cards; time and space vary dizzyingly in Through the Looking-Glass while size changes drastically in Wonderland. This is all even more significant when considering the main motif of the book, the looking-glass, or mirrors.

Even though both books are considered works of children's literature, and both reflect on the theme of growing-up, Through the Looking Glass approaches this theme in a more abrupt and less playful way. It is as if the troubles associated with approaching maturity are introduced in Alice in Wonderland and then met with resignation in Through the Looking Glass.

***Through the Looking Glass Summary:***Alice is sitting in a chair scolding her kitten, Kitty, when she notices the alternate world inside the Looking Glass. She determines to explore this other world, and as soon as she steps inside, she finds a place much like yet much different from her home. She encounters a smiling clock, animate chess pieces and a book with backwards text, but determined to see all of this amazing new place before she has to return, she abandons the living room and steps outside.

After a confusing romp through the garden, talking flowers direct Alice to the [Red Queen](https://www.gradesaver.com/red-queen), who informs Alice that she is a part of a giant chess game. Alice's goal is to become a queen herself, and the Red Queen instructs her that she must begin in this second square and inevitably reach the eighth square in order for this aspiration to be realized. She explains also a bit of the backwards nature of life in the Looking-Glass world.

Alice jumps over the first brook, which brings her to her first adventure. She finds herself in a carriage full of animals, and once she passes over the next brook, she realizes she is alone with an enlarged gnat from the carriage. She encounters Tweedledee and Tweedledum next, who dance, recite poetry and bicker. She is thrust into a shop which turns into a boat and then back into a shop. In that shop is an egg, which transforms into [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list" \l "humpty-dumpty).

Soldiers arrive at Humpty Dumpty's wall, and with them, she notices the White King, with whom she travels to town to see the Lion and the Unicorn battle. After sharing some cake with onlookers, she finds herself alone in the forest, until she is joined by two knights who fight to determine who will take her prisoner. The victor, the Red Knight, leads her to the brook that is the final barrier to her queenship.

Jumping over the final brook into the eighth square, Alice is joined by the Red and White Queens, who frustrate her with their impossible quizzing. She joins a feast that is being celebrated in her honor, but soon things begin to go awry, and suddenly, the Red Queen is actually her kitten, and she is back in her living room. Alice is left wondering who had been dreaming during her adventures in the Looking-Glass world.

## Alice

Alice is the protagonist of the story. She is a playful, imaginative seven-year-old who was also the main character of Carroll's first book. She is inspired by an actual girl who was in some ways Carroll's ward. She leads the reader through the looking-glass world, which is a metaphor for her journey to adulthood. She is both insightful and ignorant; she often does not understand the characters in the looking-glass world, but often it seems that her thoughts and conversation make more logical sense than theirs. She is persistent in making it through to the eighth square, and she consistently shows her precocious personality through the shameless curiousity and fearless decision-making she engages in while wandering through the looking-glass world.

Alice spends the entire book participating in a game of chess, in which she is a white pawn trying to make it to the eighth square so that she can become a queen. As much as the book emphasizes the necessity of completing that journey, so, too, does it push Alice forward with regret. This tone illustrates the strong paternal feelings the author had for Alice in real life as well as his imagination.

## Tweedledum and Tweedledee

Tweedledee and Tweedledum are twin brothers who encounter Alice again in the looking-glass world. They were also present in Wonderland, in Carroll's first book. They are important because they embody proper social behavior and norms. Even when they engage in fighting, they first decide they are going to do it and then set a time limit so that they can sit down for dinner at the appropriate hour. They impart a message of caution, both through their strict adherence to rules and also through the story of the Walrus and the Carpenter, which they relate to Alice.

There is also a mean streak in these two brothers, for the tease Alice about the idea that she is merely a figment of the Red King's imagination. They claim that she is not real, and that she is only a character in the Red King's dream. Alice is disturbed by this idea, even though she questions at the end of the book whose dream was responsible for the looking-glass world.

## Humpty Dumpty

This is also a character who appears not only in this book, but in the author's prequel as well. He is also the subject of a popular nursery rhyme. He is an egg (though he vehemently denies it) with a face and human clothes. Alice is not fond of him, which is not surprising; he constantly interrupts her to instruct her on vocabulary and language. Carroll uses this character to express his view on the ways in which people misabuse language. Humpty Dumpty is nauseatingly confident about his definitions of words, even though most of what he has to say is ridiculous.

He does introduce Alice and the reader to the concept of the portmantaeu word, which is a word that combines two words and their meanings into a new word. He does this in order to explain Jabberwocky in his own terms before his inevitably fall.

## White Knight

The White Knight is the protagonist in the last leg of Alice's journey. He saves her from the Red Knight, who wishes to capture "the white pawn." Instead of capturing her, he treats her as an equal and allows her to roam free, although he does express his feelings about her particular journey. He is a disorganized, clumsy character who is interested in bogus inventions. He does, however, have a kind heart.

## ***Theme:*** Reflection/Reversal

The most apparent example of this theme is the looking-glass itself, which provides a reflection of the actual world for [Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice) to explore. Within the looking-glass, everything is backwards. Text is reversed: Alice reads the poem Jabberwocky backwards. Space/direction is inverted: Alice must walk away from where she wants to go in the garden in order to actually get there. Ideas are also inverted, which is plain in many of the conversations that Alice has with the characters encountered in the looking-glass world. Tweedledee and Tweedledum are mirror images of each other. The [White Knight](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#white-knight) talks about putting a right foot into a left shoe. In the railway carriage, Alice is traveling in the wrong direction.

## Satire

Carroll does not mean this tale to be serious. For one thing, an imaginative child who talks to cats is the protagonist, and it is she who leads the reader through the book. Additionally, there is no sense of consistency in the book; as soon as a rule for the looking-glass world is introduced, it is either abandoned or changed. Further, Carroll appears to be poking fun at adult intellectualism. All the characters who attempt logical debate either argue themselves into confusion or lose to a seven-year-old Alice.

## Dreaming

Carroll sets his entire book in the context of a dream. Whose dream it is remains unclear, but Alice definitely acknowledges that she was having adventures in someone's dream, if not her own. What is so important about this is the fact that the absence of reality does not matter to the protagonist, and it clearly does not matter to the author. In fact, Carroll seems to believe that dreaming is the ideal, especially for young children, as suggested by the poem at the very end of the book. He goes as far as to suggest that there might not be any set reality at all, and that life is just the stuff of dreams.

This nonchalance about the issue of what is real and what is not is partly what makes Alice such a compelling protagonist. The precocious Alice takes everything in stride. In a way, her vast imagination allows Carroll to expose the reader to a multitude of fantasies. And because Alice never ultimately passes judgment to the point of denying these whimsies, the author is able to bring his reader into an intricate world entirely of his own invention.

## Alienation

Alice is in fact alone through much of the story, though not as much literally as figuratively. She is the only one of her kind in the Looking-Glass world, so even though she is surrounded by creatures pretty much at all times, she has trouble relating to their foreign ways. She is also isolated from the rest of her family due to her imagination; there is a reference to the frustration she causes when she plays pretend. At many points in the story, the reader has the sense that Alice has no place to go to feel at home; she expresses her loneliness while in the Looking-Glass world, but she immediately rebounds and worries about ultimately having to end the game and return to her house.

## Adulthood

Carroll's attitudes toward adulthood are not entirely clear in the book, though the book itself can be seen as a motif for the progression from childhood to adulthood, as represented by Alice's journey as a pawn to queenhood. She undergoes many experiences that can be seen as crucial for development, such as the discovery of identity that is demanded by the situation in the wood of forgetfulness. Many of the poems recited focus on the theme of passing youth. However, the incompetence and immaturity of those that may be considered adult characters in the book calls the idea of a progression into question. Alice often proves to be smarter, more thoughtful and more resourceful than the "adults" she encounters in the looking glass.

## Moral Choice and Social Ettiquette

There are many cases in [*Through the Looking Glass*](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass) in which the question of control and intentionality come into play. Looming over the entire novel is the question of whether Alice's adventures were really just a figment of the Red King's dream. Additionally, it is unclear whether Alice has any choice about moving from the second to the eighth square, and there are a number of instances during which she seems to question her goal.

Carroll, as a Victorian era author, is concerned about the methodical, logical examination of behavior. Within almost every conversation Alice has with the characters in the Looking-Glass world is at least one critique of their social norms. But these are not serious critiques, for it has been established by the author that everyone in this world lives backwards, and as Alice has observed, many aspects of living backwards seem impossible. Inevitably, though, this often nonsensical evaluation of rules might indeed be a comment on the burdensome obligations of adulthood and the moral/social responsibilities that accompany it.

***Quotes:***"Do you hear the snow against the window-panes, Kitty? How nice and soft it sounds! Just as if some one was kissing the window all over outside. I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields, that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, "Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again." And when they wake up in the summer, Kitty, they dress themselves all in green, and dance about -- whenever the wind blows -- oh, that's very pretty!...And I do so wish it was true! I'm sure the woods look sleepy in the autumn, when the leaves are getting brown."

Alice, page 126

Here Alice provides an image of the seasons using both a simile and an extended metaphor. Alice anthropomorphizes the seasons, expressing her desire for the whimsical. She is not content to see the seasons change; she wants there to be something more to this scientific phenomenon. In that sense, this quote foreshadows Alice's journey into the mirror.

This quote also provides characterization of Alice, for it expresses her need for the whimsical. Indeed, in the very next paragraph, the reader discovers that unlike her sister, who is very "exact," Alice loves to pretend.

"No, I shouldn't," said Alice, surprised into contradicting her at last: "a hill can't be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense--

The Red Queen shook her head. "You may call it 'nonsense' if you like," she said, "but I've heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!"

Alice, the Red Queen, page 143

The Red Queen claims rationality

At the next peg the Queen turned again, and this time she said "Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing--turn out your toes as you walk--and remember who you are!"

the Red Queen, page 147

*Through the Looking Glass* has been seen as Alice's journey through childhood and into adulthood. If this is indeed the case, an important lesson to learn along the way is to keep a firm hold on one's identity. There are many challenges in growing up, many of those aimed at influencing a child to become something specific. The Red Queen is metaphorically warning Alice against these many influences.

How it happened, Alice never knew, but exactly as she came to the last peg, she was gone. Whether she vanished into the air, or whether she ran quickly into the wood...there was no way of guessing, but she was gone, and Alice began to remember that she was a Pawn, and that it would soon be time for her to move.

Narrator, page 147

It is important that Alice plays the role of a Pawn while she travels through the Looking-Glass world. It is unclear how much control over her movements she has, considering that she is a chess piece. Further, pawns have much less freedom of movement than the other pieces in the game, and they are often used as sacrifices so that other more important pieces can be saved. But the Pawn does have the opportunity to travel all the way across the board in order to transform into a Queen, which is Alice's goal. This is a near impossible journey in chess, which foreshadows the impending challenges Alice will have to face.

"Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

Tweedledee, page 168

Alice, Tweedledee, and Tweedledum find the Red King sleeping in the wood. When Alice says that it is impossible to know about what he is dreaming, Tweedledee claims that Alice is merely a character in the Red King's dream. Alice objects to this proposal vehemently, arguing that she must be real. The discussion ends abruptly when Alice dismisses the possibility and asks the boys about the weather.

This is an important question because it is related to the question of how much choice Alice has in her movements through the Looking-Glass world. If she is just a figment of the Red King's imagination, then her actions and choices have already been determined for her. Carroll brings up this question again at the end of the book, when Alice supposedly wakes from her own dream.

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

the White Queen, page 177

Here the White Queen is providing Alice with yet another lesson. Believing the impossible is the prerogative of children, since they do not yet have to carry the burden of responsibility and rationality that comes with adulthood. Children should be imaginative, and the White Queen is trying to communicate with Alice that she should not have a hard time believing the things that occur in the Looking-Glass world.

"What's the use of their having names," the Gnat said, "if they won't answer to them."

"No use to *them*," said Alice; "but it's useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?"

Gnat and Alice, page 152

Carroll does a lot of philosophizing through Alice in the book. Here, he is commenting on the fact that without minds, names and labels do not exist. Naming is a mechanism used by the mind to organize the universe. He is calling attention to the fact that a name is not intrinsic; it is contingent and arbitrary. Here again, Alice imposes sense on the world in which there is a great deal of nonsense. Again, she exhibits a great deal of knowledge and maturity for her age.

"That's the effect of living backwards," the Queen said kindly: "it always makes one a little giddy at first--"

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In the Victorian era, children were in many ways, especially legally, treated more like adults than they had been in the past. They were expected to bear a good deal of responsibility. This quote is perhaps a reference to this idea of beginning one's life as an adult rather than a child.

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,

Alice moving under skies

Never seen by waking eyes.

Narrator, 245

This is a section from the poem that ends the book. The poem is an acrostic, for the first letter of each line spells out Alice's full name, Alice Pleasance Liddell. Alice Liddell was the young girl who inspired *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*. The poem is entitlted "A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky," which is apt, because Carroll first came up with Alice's stories while he was out in a boat with the Liddell girls. Alice apparently asked him to entertain them, and the stories were the result.

Research shows that Alice Liddell was not actually similar to the Alice of the stories, and Carroll was known to have remarked that Alice was a totally imaginary character. This particular set of lines confirms this: Alice is a figment of Carroll's imaginations, the material of his dreams.

"Of course I'll wait," said Alice: "and thank you very much for coming so far--and for the song--I liked it very much."

"I hope so," the Knight said doubtfully: "but you didn't cry as much as I thought you would ."

Alice and the White Knight, 222

Alice is about to proceed to the eighth square, where she will be crowned queen. This step is meant to symbolize her coming-of-age, which is captured in the melancholic song of the knight. She is oblivious to the meaning of this final step and to the meaning of the knight's song, which is why she does not share the knight's sentiments. She, like most children, is not aware of the fact that she is growing up. She lives in the moment, and will only realize once it has already happened that she is an adult and no longer a child.

***Summary of Through the Looking Glass:***One cold November day, [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) lounges in the sitting room and plays with her black kitten, [**Kitty**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), while the mother cat [**Dinah**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) cleans the white kitten, [**Snowdrop**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters). Kitty is mischievous and plays with Alice's ball of yarn, unwinding it, so Alice scolds the kitten for this and for several other crimes. Alice threatens to send Kitty to Looking-glass House, which is the house she can see through the mirror above the mantel. Excitedly, Alice crawls through the mirror and looks around. She sees tiny living chessmen on the hearth, but the pieces don't seem to see Alice. The [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) yells for her baby daughter, [**Lily**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), who's up on a table, so Alice picks the queen up to help her. This shocks the queen. Alice lifts the White King up too. Alice looks around and flips through a book. She realizes that the text isn't in a foreign language—since this is Looking-glass World, the text is backwards. She holds the book up to a mirror and is able to read a poem titled "[**Jabberwocky**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/the-poem-jabberwocky)." Alice thinks it sounds pretty, but she can't make out what it's about. Realizing that she needs to get on with her exploration, Alice heads outside.

Alice sees a hill in the garden and decides to climb it so she can look around. No matter how hard Alice tries, the paths take her back to the house instead of to the hill. Talking flowers, a [**Tiger-lily**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) and a [**Rose**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), stop Alice. The Rose tells Alice that the tree in the garden protects them with its bark by saying "bough-wough." Alice catches sight of the [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) in the distance. She's now taller than Alice. Alice decides to go speak to her and ignores the Rose when she suggests that Alice head in the opposite direction. Alice ends up at the house again and, frustrated, decides to head for the house. She finds herself on the hill in front of the Red Queen in a moment.

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The queen imperiously asks Alice what she's doing here and gives her directions on how to properly carry herself. She insists that the hill is a valley, confusing Alice. Alice looks around and sees that the surrounding land looks like a chessboard, with brooks dividing the squares. Alice asks if she can play and says that she'd love to be a queen. The Red Queen allows Alice to join them as a pawn and says that when she gets to the Eighth Square, Alice can be a queen. Without warning, the Red Queen drags Alice along as they run. Alice is out of breath and confused—they're not going anywhere. The Red Queen insists that this is normal; a person must run if they wish to stay still. When Alice complains of thirst, the queen offers her a biscuit. It's extremely dry, but Alice takes it to be polite. Then, the queen tells Alice how to move across the board and disappears.

To get her bearings, Alice looks around and tries to identify major rivers or mountains. She runs down the hill and jumps over the first brook. She finds herself in a train car populated with animals. The [**Guard**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) asks everyone for their tickets. Alice is the only one without a ticket and all the other passengers chide her for this. The Guard disappears and Alice hears an insect's voice in her ear. It quietly suggests jokes that she could make as the train leaps over a brook. Alice and the [**Gnat**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-gnat) find themselves under a tree. The Gnat is the size of a chicken. They discuss different insects and their names, and the Gnat suggests that there's no purpose in having a name if an insect doesn't answer to it. It says that it'd be convenient if Alice lost her name, as her governess wouldn't be able to call her for lessons. The Gnat makes one final joke but disappears when Alice points out that the joke was terrible. Alice moves on and comes to a wood in which individuals forget all names. A [**Fawn**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-fawn) appears and helps Alice through the wood. On the other side, the Fawn remembers its name and that it's supposed to be scared of humans, so it leaps away in fear. Alice cries of loneliness.

Alice finally reaches the identical men [**Tweedledum**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledum) and [**Tweedledee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledee). She remembers an old song about brothers named Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Alice asks how to get through the wood, but the brothers ignore her. They each extend a hand to shake and, not wanting to offend either of them, Alice takes both of their hands at the same time. They dance in a circle and then Tweedledee decides to recite the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter." He ignores Alice's request for directions. The poem is about the titular characters tricking oysters so they can eat them, and when Tweedledee finishes, Alice tries to figure out which character was the better person. She hears a loud noise. Tweedledee leads her to the sleeping [**Red King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) and says that Alice isn't real; she's a character in the Red King's dream. This makes Alice cry, but she consoles herself by insisting that this is all nonsense. She makes a final plea for directions, but the brothers decide that they must fight over a broken rattle. They make Alice help them strap on their "armor"—linens and pillows—but before they can fight, a huge crow flies over and sends them running for cover.

The disheveled White Queen runs toward Alice in pursuit of her shawl. Alice helps the queen fix her hair and the shawl, so the queen offers to hire Alice as a maid. Alice refuses, as she's not interested in the compensation—jam every other day—but the queen insists that Alice would never get the jam anyway, as today isn't every other day. Alice is even more confused when the queen tells her about remembering in both directions. To demonstrate how it works, the queen screams in pain before pricking her finger on a brooch. Alice follows the queen over a brook and then finds herself in a dark shop with a knitting [**Sheep**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-sheep). Alice tries to look at the things in the shop, but if she looks directly at something, she can't see it. The Sheep hands Alice a pair of knitting needles and Alice finds herself in a boat with the Sheep. The Sheep inexplicably yells "feather," but Alice doesn't know how to respond. Alice stops to gather beautiful [**rushes**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/rushes), but she doesn't notice that the rushes wilt as soon as she stows them in the boat. Suddenly, Alice and the Sheep are back in the shop and Alice agrees to buy an egg. The Sheep sets the egg down and Alice walks toward it, but it seems to get further and further away.

The egg turns into **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)**. Humpty Dumpty is offended by everything Alice says, so Alice quietly recites the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" to herself. When Alice introduces herself to Humpty Dumpty, he insists that her name is stupid—it doesn't tell him anything about what shape Alice is. They discuss Alice's age and Humpty Dumpty insists that Alice should've stopped growing at age seven instead of allowing herself to reach seven and a half. Not wanting to argue, Alice compliments Humpty Dumpty's belt. He snarls that it's a cravat and was an un-birthday present. He tells Alice that un-birthday presents are better than birthday presents, as a person has more un-birthdays than birthdays. He declares that this is "glory," which he says means "a knock-down argument." Alice is perplexed, but Humpty Dumpty says that words mean whatever he wants them to mean. Alice asks Humpty Dumpty to help her decode "Jabberwocky." He gets through the first verse and then forces Alice to listen to a poem he wrote just for her. It's about fish and it ends abruptly.

Alice travels on, hears a crash, and sees lots of knights and horses running through the forest. The knights can't stay on their horses. She comes upon the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king), who explains that he sent all his horses and men except for two to help Humpty Dumpty. They see one of the king's messengers, **[Haigha](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/haigha)**, coming up the road. Alice happily plays a game with herself in which she lists silly things about Haigha that all start with H, and the king joins in. To her delight, when Haigha reaches the king, he pulls the foodstuffs out of his bag that Alice mentioned in her game. Haigha shares that the [**Lion**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) and the [**Unicorn**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-unicorn) are fighting in the next town for the White King's crown, though the king assures Alice that the winner won't get his crown. Alice remembers a song about a fighting lion and a unicorn and the brown and white bread that stopped the fight. She follows the king and Haigha. They join the other messenger, [**Hatta**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/hatta), and the creatures' fight stops. The Unicorn is shocked to see Alice, as he thought children were just fabulous monsters. He shouts for the plum cake as the Lion joins the group. The Lion tasks Alice with cutting the cake, but she can't cut it. The Unicorn tells Alice to pass the cake around and then cut it. It separates into three pieces. Loud drums start up and Alice leaps over a brook to escape the noise.

When things are quiet again, a [**Red Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) rides up to take Alice prisoner. The [**White Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-knight) appears, fights the Red Knight, and wins the battle—even though they both fall off many times. The White Knight offers to escort Alice to the Eighth Square. As they walk, the knight falls off many times and they talk about his love of inventing. His inventions, however, are convoluted and don't work very well. At the edge of the square, he tells her a poem about meeting a man sitting on a gate and then rides off. Alice steps over the brook and realizes that there's a big [**crown**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/alice-s-crown) on her head.

Alice is thrilled to be a queen. She practices walking in the crown but finds it difficult. The Red Queen and the White Queen appear out of nowhere, scold Alice, and then invite each other to Alice's dinner party. Alice is perplexed and suggests that if it's her dinner party, then she should invite people, but the queens tell her that her manners need work. They begin to give Alice riddles, but Alice thinks that the riddles are nonsense. When the White Queen begins to yawn, the Red Queen tells Alice to sing the queen a lullaby. Both queens fall asleep. Their snoring turns into a song and Alice finds herself in front of a doorway that reads "Queen Alice." She can't figure out how to get inside, as there are no bells marked as being for her.

A creature tells Alice that they're not letting anyone else in, and an old [**Frog**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) tells Alice to stop pestering the door. The door flies open and Alice steps in and takes a seat between the two queens. Seeing everyone in attendance, Alice is happy that the queens invited people—she wouldn't have known who to invite. A waiter brings out a [**Mutton**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), introduces it to Alice, and then takes it away. The Red Queen explains that Alice can't eat food that's been introduced to her. A waiter brings out a [**Pudding**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) next and Alice cuts into it after being introduced. The Pudding scolds Alice and the Red Queen tells Alice to make a speech. Alice complies and says that most of the poetry she's heard today has been about fish and asks why that's the case. The White Queen recites a riddle about fish in reply but as Alice ponders the riddle, the queens lift her up to make another speech. Things begin to change rapidly: table settings turn into birds and guests greedily guzzle food. Alice sees the Red Queen's face in the soup tureen and then sees the queen on the floor and she’s the size of a doll. She begins to shake the queen. She wakes up and realizes that she's holding Kitty. Alice happily recounts her dream to her cats, suggests that Snowdrop became the White Queen and Kitty became the Red Queen, and wonders if the dream was her own dream or if she really was in the Red King's dream.

Themes:  
**Youth, Identity, and Growing Up**

Though written several years after [***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland), *Through the Looking-Glass* picks up a mere six months after [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice)'s first experience in a nonsensical, dreamlike world. Now "seven and a half, exactly," Alice falls asleep one November day while playing with her kittens, climbs through the mirror over the fireplace, and finds herself in Looking-glass House and the giant chessboard surrounding it. Once Alice gets her bearings and joins the chess game—first as a pawn, but with the goal of becoming a queen—she symbolically starts to come of age and eventually reaches a version of adulthood when she's crowned queen. However, Alice's journey makes it clear that navigating childhood on the way to adulthood is a lonely process, and the end goal—adulthood—is, at best, a questionable one.

Because *Through the Looking-Glass* is seven-and-a-half-year-old Alice's dream, it's possible to read Alice's struggles and anxieties in Looking-glass World as reflections of her anxieties about growing up in the real world. In many cases, *Through the Looking-Glass* suggests that being a child and growing up are lonely states of being. The novel opens with Alice talking to her cats, [**Dinah**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), [**Kitty**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), and [**Snowdrop**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters). While the narrator mentions Alice's sister at several points in passing, Alice appears to be very much alone with the cats and, eventually, with the beings that spring into existence in her mind. Even when Alice does find herself in the company of other people, she remains lonely: in Looking-glass World, Alice feels unable to voice many of her thoughts to others in an attempt to remain polite and in others' good graces. The reader, for instance, is the only one privy to the fact that figuring out how to shake hands with [**Tweedledee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledee) and [**Tweedledum**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledum) is an intensely difficult experience: what if she offends one by shaking the other's hand first? Even characters who insist they're there to help her, like the [**Gnat**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-gnat) or the [**White Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-knight), don't provide much support and Alice is still effectively left to her own devices to navigate the chessboard and the larger project of growing up.

The novel also suggests that reckoning with one's rapidly changing identity is a key part of growing up, even (or especially) when others aren't much help in this process. At several points, Alice has to think critically about who she is and, more broadly, what the names of things are even for. When Alice and the Gnat discuss the names of different insects, the Gnat demands to know whether the insects in Alice's world respond to their names. Upon learning that they don't, the Gnat is shocked. Alice, however, suggests that there's more to a name than referring to an individual: a name, she proposes, will help others figure out who or what something is. With this, the novel suggests that identity goes two ways: it's both something personal to an individual, and it helps other people fit that individual into their conception of the world.

Similarly, **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)** is derisive when he learns Alice's name: in addition to declaring it "stupid," he suggests that names must mean something. According to Humpty Dumpty, his name refers to his shape, while "With a name like [Alice], [she] might be any shape, almost." To him, "Alice" tells him nothing about who the child in front of him is. This episode in particular (especially when considered alongside Alice's experience in a wood in which travelers forget all nouns, including their names) suggests that childhood is a state of potential. A child can grow up to be anything or anyone, but the novel also suggests that the results of this potential aren't always positive. After Alice leaves the wood, for instance, the [**Fawn**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-fawn) who helped her heartbreakingly remembers its own identity, and consequently that it's supposed to be scared of humans like Alice. The Fawn's experience of learning its name leads to fear and isolation, a turn of events that foreshadows Alice's unsatisfying reign as queen at the end of the novel. For both Alice and the Fawn, remembering their names represents a form of self-knowledge—but in this case, that self-knowledge closes doors, rather than opening them or giving Alice more power to interpret or move through Looking-glass World.

Though Alice wants to be a queen throughout the novel, actually becoming a queen is far less rewarding than she likely anticipated. Upon crossing into the Eighth Square, Alice discovers that there's a [**crown**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/alice-s-crown) on her head, signifying her royalty—but it's not comfortable, and Alice struggles to figure out how to move and balance with it. Further, Alice is denied all the food at a dinner party in her honor, and the party itself takes place under questionable circumstances: the [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) and the [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) both insist that Alice is the one throwing the party, while Alice, upon arriving at the location of the party, can barely figure out how to get into the building. Taking the party as a metaphor for adulthood, Alice's experience suggests that while adulthood may look desirable to children, and while childhood may simultaneously seem anxiety-inducing and difficult, being a child might be better on a whole: upon waking, Alice happily resumes chatting to her cats with wonder and nostalgia about her time in Looking-glass World. With this, Carroll seems to suggest that part of the joy of being a child is dreaming about what adulthood might be like, without having to actually tackle the hardships and difficulties that come with the territory. Similarly, adults would do well to take adulthood less seriously and remember the joys of childhood at every opportunity.

**Adulthood and the Adult World**

Nearly all of the people or creatures that [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) meets in Looking-glass World are adults, at least in some sense of the word. However, none of the adults that Alice meets are especially helpful. Instead, the adults seem caught up in pointless philosophical or logical arguments and silly rules, and in many cases, Alice seems more competent and mature than they are. Together, all of this implies that adults aren't nearly as competent as children might think they are, while Alice's brief stint as queen suggests that adulthood itself isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) first introduces Alice to the fact that in Looking-glass World, things don't function in the way that Alice expects them to. This is Alice's first clue that the adult world isn't going to live up to her expectations, good or bad, and that part of reaching adulthood is having these expectations about the world dashed. Alice's interactions with the [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) have much the same effect. When Alice runs into the disheveled queen in the woods, the White Queen matter-of-factly explains that she can remember in both directions—that is, she can remember the future and the past—and to demonstrate, the queen screams before pricking her finger and then expresses sadness that a man is being punished for a crime he hasn't committed yet. However, when Alice questions the ethics of this and asks what will happen if the man *doesn't* commit the crime he's currently being punished for, the White Queen brushes her off. Through her reaction, the White Queen suggests that the adult world she represents is impenetrable and unknowable to a child like Alice—even though Alice obviously has valuable insights about it.

In other cases, Alice—the only actual child in Looking-glass World—appears far more adult than any of her "adult" companions, suggesting that in important ways, children are actually more observant, polite, and competent than the adults around them. Both the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king) and the [**Red King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), for example, are ineffective kings. While the Red King spends the entire novel asleep, the White King fails to follow through and send all his horses and men to rescue **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)**. The White Queen, meanwhile, spends the novel in complete disarray and is unable to keep track of her shawl—a fairly childish problem to have—while the [**White Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-knight) cannot ride for more than a few yards without unceremoniously tumbling off of his horse. Instead, it falls to Alice to help these adults when she can. She retrieves and pins the White Queen's shawl back on and helps the White Knight back onto his horse—and at one point pulls him out of a ditch, which he fell into face-first.

As queen—which, for Alice, is a symbolic version of adulthood—Alice discovers even more evidence that suggests that adults aren't all as competent or as powerful as she might think, or might dream of one day being herself. To begin with, having the [**crown**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/alice-s-crown) may make Alice queen, but it doesn't offer her any enlightenment as to how one *acts* like a queen. Moving through Looking-glass World as a queen is just as disquieting and difficult as it was when Alice was a pawn: the other queens jointly arrange for Alice to throw a party, something which Alice has no knowledge of; Alice struggles to figure out how to get to the party in the first place; and finally, she finds herself unable to figure out the rules and correct behavior once she does finally make it to the party. With this, Carroll suggests that adulthood really isn't that noble of a goal: it's just as confusing as childhood is and it doesn't provide any real benefits aside from simply getting to call oneself an adult. Adulthood, per *Through the Looking-Glass*, is little different from childhood—the stakes may be higher and there are certainly privileges that come with being an adult in the eyes of society, but everyone is still just trying to figure out how to navigate the world.

**Rules and Etiquitte:***Through the Looking-Glass* is framed as a chess game. Carroll includes a diagram and a list of moves in the introduction to the novel, and [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice)'s journey as a pawn more or less follows the moves laid out in the introduction. While framing the novel in terms of chess might suggest that Looking-glass World is built on a similar foundation of rules and etiquette, Carroll goes to great lengths to show that this isn't true: while some things in Looking-glass World are in reverse, for example, plenty more aren't. Other rules seem similarly arbitrary, are short-lived, or are very uncomfortable for Alice. In this way, the novel takes issue with the rules governing society as a whole and reminds the reader that the rules of the real world are, in many cases, just as silly as those at work in Looking-glass World.

By organizing *Through the Looking-Glass* around the motif of chess, Lewis Carroll creates the initial understanding that Alice's journey is going to be rational and predictable. Once Alice joins the game of chess as a pawn, she moves as a pawn does: she begins on the Second Square and—as pawns can move two squares in their first turn—moves quickly to the Fourth Square, before proceeding as anticipated to the Eighth Square, where she becomes a queen. While not entirely essential to understanding the story, a basic understanding of the rules of chess allows the reader to better interpret certain characters' qualities or actions. Knights, for example, move in an L shape in chess, which explains why the [**White Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-knight) continually falls off his horse—he literally cannot move in a straight line. Queens, meanwhile, can move anywhere on the board and as many squares as they'd like, which is why Alice runs into the [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) and the [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) multiple times in various places. Similarly, the brooks that Alice crosses symbolize crossing over into a new square, which, in many versions of the novel (including the one used in this guide), is noted visually by a line break and a collection of small stars. However, despite offering the reader and Alice these touchstones that seem like they should give the story clear boundaries, the actual rules of play and etiquette that Alice encounters are far less clear. In many cases, Alice has a hard time understanding the rules she's subject to and struggles to follow them.

Though Alice has an argumentative, streak, she is, at heart, a polite child who wants to make others feel comfortable. But because the etiquette of this world is so unclear and even absurd, this ultimately proves extremely difficult, both for Alice and for those she encounters. For Alice, one of the most annoying things that keeps happening to her is that the beings she encounters ask her to sit and listen to them recite poetry. Alice feels unable to decline these requests and so hears such poems as "Haddocks' Eyes" and "The Walrus and the Carpenter"—poems that, though entertaining for the reader, do nothing for Alice but slow her down. With these poetry recitations in particular, the novel suggests that while politeness and etiquette may be systems designed to smooth social interactions, they can also very easily be co-opted to work only in one person's favor: if she wants to be polite, Alice is a captive audience.

Despite suggesting some obvious rules within the novel (Alice recognizes that she's in a chess game, for example, and suspects that things might be backwards since she's in Looking-glass World), Carroll ultimately makes it clear that these rules aren't especially useful to Alice, since they're limited in scope and applied inconsistently. Alice first discovers that things are backwards in Looking-glass World as she attempts to reach the top of the hill in the garden to look around. When Alice aims for the hill she inevitably ends up back at Looking-glass House; when she aims for the house, she reaches the hill. The Red Queen then introduces Alice to the idea that in order to stay still in Looking-glass World, one needs to run very fast. However, these and other rules only apply sometimes. Alice is, for the rest of the novel, able to aim for the Eighth Square and get there by walking. While these inconsistencies certainly make the case that rules and etiquette are silly and subjective, the way that Alice must struggle to adapt to whatever rules come at her also suggests a more far-reaching conclusion: in a frustrating world where rules and regulations might make little sense, being able to adapt is a useful skill that will serve anyone well, whether in Looking-glass World or in the real world.

**Sense, Nonsense, and Language**

While not as lighthearted as [***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland), *Through the Looking-Glass* nevertheless occupies the same silly, nonsensical world as its predecessor. Through wordplay, pointless battles, and the fantastical, dreamlike setting, *Through the Looking-Glass* makes nonsense the norm—while also suggesting that attempting to make sense out of nonsense is a normal, if often futile, endeavor.

From the moment [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) crawls through the looking-glass and into Looking-glass World, the novel asks that the reader—and, for that matter, Alice—suspend their disbelief. Looking-glass World is one in which flowers talk, nursery rhyme characters and chess pieces come to life, and sheep knit while inexplicably shouting rowing terms. It's a world in which it seems like anything is possible. This unpredictable chaos, however, doesn't stop Alice from trying to make sense of the nonsense happening around her. Importantly, Alice recognizes that she doesn't have the knowledge or the skills to understand the inner workings of Looking-glass World, so she makes sure to ask questions of everyone in an attempt to fit what she sees into a framework that makes sense. Despite these attempts—as when Alice tries to figure out whether the thing around **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)**'s middle is a cravat around his neck or a belt around his waist—Alice is overwhelmingly unsuccessful in interpreting what she sees, but in some ways, this is exactly the point. There's no good way to interpret the book’s fantastical happenings or verbal nonsense—the job of the reader, and of Alice, is to take what happens in stride and enjoy it.

In many cases, Carroll uses nonsense to let readers in on jokes and poke fun at stuffy traditions or schools of thought that, upon closer inspection, look just as silly as the [**White Knight**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-knight) constantly falling off his horse. Anything, Carroll suggests, can look silly and contrived if one is willing to see it as such. Alice's conversation with [**Tweedledee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledee) and [**Tweedledum**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledum) about the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter," for example, pokes fun at circular philosophical arguments that have no one correct answer. Similarly, when the twins turn Alice's attention to the snoring [**Red King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) and suggest that Alice is just a dreamy figment of his imagination, Carroll gestures to some religious theories circulating in the Victorian era, most notably that all humans exist in God's dream. Situating this reference in a tale like *Through the Looking-Glass*, however, implies that while they may be fun to think about, such theories shouldn't be taken too seriously.

At several points, Carroll makes fun of formal education and academic ways of knowing. The [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) refers to the dictionary as "nonsense," while Humpty Dumpty suggests that since Alice read the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" in a book, it's equivalent to a history of England. Most tellingly, Humpty Dumpty decodes the poem "[**Jabberwocky**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/the-poem-jabberwocky)" for Alice. "Jabberwocky" is a poem that, by many standards, is complete and utter nonsense; it never defines exactly what the fearsome and fictional jabberwock is, or tells the reader what a bandersnatch or a tum-tum tree are, and about half of the words in the poem aren't even real words. However, the poem also follows a familiar format, rhyme scheme, and meter that make it, at the very least, fun on an auditory level to read or recite. Through the poem (and through the nonsensical novel as a whole), Carroll makes the point that literature should be enjoyable, nonsense or not.

Humpty Dumpty's imperious and self-important interpretation of "Jabberwocky," however, reads as a still-relevant critique of seriousness, scholarliness, and holding up intelligence and formality over anything else. Decoding the poem allows Humpty Dumpty the opportunity to lord his knowledge over Alice, but much of the poem's meaning remains a mystery and it seems like Humpty Dumpty might even be making up his interpretation altogether. With this in mind, it's important to remember that Lewis Carroll and a few contemporaries invented the genre of nonsense literature. Prior to [***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland), it was unthinkable that a talking sheep could exist outside of a simple morality tale—or, for that matter, that literature intended for children didn't need to have a “moral” to be meaningful or worth reading. With this, Carroll again makes the case that literature, whether it makes logical sense or not, should be fun—and that, if the reader so chooses, that can be one's final interpretation of a work.

***Character Analysis:  
Alice:***The seven-and-a-half-year-old protagonist. Alice is a happy child, if a lonely one; the novel opens with her talking to her cats, [**Dinah**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), [**Snowdrop**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), and [**Kitty**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), and she's the only human who appears in the novel. She has an expansive imagination, her favorite phrase being "let's pretend." This leads Alice to fall asleep one November day and dream that she climbs through a looking-glass and into Looking-glass House and the world beyond, where a giant chess game is taking place. She travels through this strange Looking-glass Word, and because this is a dream, it reflects Alice's thoughts and anxieties about her real world. Loneliness and sadness plague her often, especially when individuals she likes and admires, like the [**Fawn**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-fawn), abandon her suddenly. She's also extremely concerned with figuring out who she is. Many of the beings she meets along her journey ask her questions about her name, who she is, and what would happen if she didn't have a name. Through all of this, Alice comes to the conclusion that she likes her name, that it's important to her in most cases, and that having a name is also helpful to others who wish to identify her. Alice's goal as she travels through Looking-glass World is to transform from a pawn into a queen once she reaches the Eighth Square. This represents Alice's desire to grow up and become an adult, something that shows up as other characters, especially **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)** and the [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen), pick at Alice's manners and etiquette. In addition, Alice wants to be polite and so tries her best to comply with the rules that different characters give her. Alice is very adaptable, but she's often unsuccessful in interpreting what she's supposed to do. She also wants to make sense of what's happening around her, something that she finds extremely difficult—even when she tries to answer riddles, she often answers incorrectly or is teased, and if she starts an argument she inevitably loses. Upon waking, Alice is delighted by her dream and attempts to figure out if the dream was hers, or if she was a character in the [**Red King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters)'s dream.

The White Queen:  
One of the queens in Looking-glass World. [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) finds her extremely perplexing and not particularly queen-like. She spends the entire novel in a state of disarray, as she cannot keep track of her shawl and lost her hairbrush in the mess of her hair. Alice kindly tries to put the queen right, but though the queen appreciates Alice's help it seems to not make much of a difference. The White Queen introduces Alice to the idea that a person can remember in both directions—that is, remember the future and the past. As an example, she says that a man is currently being punished for a crime he hasn't committed yet, but when Alice asks what will happen if the man doesn't commit the crime, the White Queen offers a disturbing answer: that punishments are unequivocally good, whether someone committed a crime to deserve them or not. The White Queen can move very quickly around the chessboard and Alice sees her running hard at one point. She appears with Alice and the [**Red Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-red-queen) once Alice reaches the Eighth Square to give Alice another lesson in logic, riddles, and how to carry herself as a queen. According to the Red Queen, the White Queen came from humble beginnings and so sometimes says silly things. Upon waking, Alice believes that her cat, [**Snowdrop**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), appeared as the White Queen in her dream, and that the White Queen was so disheveled throughout the dream because Snowdrop was in the middle of a bath.

The Red Queen:  
A snappy and authoritative queen in Looking-glass World. As a queen, she can move all around the chessboard quickly. [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) greatly admires the Red Queen at first, and tries her best to follow all of her rules regarding conduct and etiquette. The queen is the first to confirm for Alice that in Looking-glass World, things are opposite what they are in Alice's world. For example, one must run quickly to stay in one place. When Alice runs into the Red Queen in the Eighth Square, however, the Red Queen begins to look horribly dismissive and, in some cases, silly. She scolds Alice for not being able to perform math, for example, but the problems she gives are riddles rather than math problems—and in several cases, they don't have a single right answer. At the dinner party, the Red Queen continues to tell Alice how to behave properly and politely, but she does so rudely and makes Alice feel as though she can't do anything right. Alice loses her temper with the Red Queen when she sees the queen's head in a tureen of soup. When Alice wakes up, she decides that her mischievous cat, [**Kitty**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters), became the Red Queen in her dream.

Humpty Dumpty:  
The egg-shaped individual from the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty." He sits high on a wall when [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) meets him. Humpty Dumpty is rude, imperious, and self-important. He insists that he can make words mean whatever he wants them to (though he pays them more for extra work) and he reprimands Alice for not being properly polite. Helpfully, he does agree to decode the first verse of the poem "[**Jabberwocky**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/symbols/the-poem-jabberwocky)" for Alice, though more than anything, this is an opportunity for Humpty Dumpty to lord his knowledge and expertise over Alice. Humpty Dumpty takes major issue with the fact that Alice didn't stop growing up at age seven and allowed herself to age six months. He offers her riddles when Alice insists that she can't stop growing. As in the nursery rhyme, Humpty Dumpty falls off his wall after Alice leaves him, while the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king) sends all his horses and men except two to help him.

The White King:  
The White King is a quiet and nervous king. Because he's a king, he's not very mobile on the chessboard, so [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) meets him in the house, when he's still the size of a chess piece, and then once along her journey. The king is very interested in memory and remembers things by writing them down. He wants to be helpful, so he sends his horses and men to help **[Humpty Dumpty](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/humpty-dumpty)** when he falls off his wall. In almost all cases, however, the king isn't able to be especially helpful. Knowledge of the "Humpty Dumpty" nursery rhyme suggests that his men won't save Humpty Dumpty, and he tells Alice that he can't save the running [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) from whatever's chasing her. Furthermore, despite being a king, the king seems uncomfortable in his role, as though he's not very powerful. The [**Lion**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) and the [**Unicorn**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-unicorn) successfully intimidate him without much effort.

The White Knight:  
A gentle but foolish older knight. Like all knights, he constantly falls off his horse and onto his head, though he assures [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) that he's a skilled rider. In addition to being a knight, the White Knight is also an avid inventor. He invents all sorts of things, from revolutionary ways to climb over a gate to desserts, but his inventions are overwhelmingly unsuccessful or more difficult than whatever they're trying to replace or solve. The White Knight also loves to be prepared for anything, so his horse wears spikes on its ankles to protect it from shark bites and he collects things that might be useful in a difficult situation. Despite finding him maddening and obnoxious, Alice is touched by the White Knight's kindness and the song he sings her.

The Gnat:  
The Gnat is, at first, a small voice in [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice)'s ear on the train, but it becomes the size of a chicken in the Fourth Square. The Gnat is a fan of bad jokes, most of which have to do with homophones, but the Gnat is inexplicably unwilling to make the jokes itself, and instead encourages Alice to make them. The Gnat also suggests that losing one's name can be an asset and that names are useless if a person or a being doesn't respond to their name. It disappears from sadness when Alice refuses to make one of its jokes.

Haigha:  
One of the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king)'s messengers. He is, according to the White King, an Anglo-Saxon messenger, and therefore exhibits Anglo-Saxon "attitudes"—that is, he dances oddly while he moves. Alice begins reciting an alphabet game when she learns Haigha's name in which she lists silly things about him beginning with H. Because of this, Haigha pulls several odd things beginning with H out of his bag, including ham sandwiches and hay. The illustrations and endnotes in the book reveal that Haigha is an incarnation of the March Hare from [***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland).

Tweedledee:  
One of the twins that [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) meets in the Fourth Square. He and his brother, [**Tweedledum**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledum), are fat and in most ways, are identical in appearance and manner. Tweedledee recites "The Walrus and the Carpenter" to Alice and suggests that it's impossible to decide which character, the walrus or the carpenter, was the better person. He's a bit of a coward and isn't interested in fighting Tweedledum over the broken rattle, though he agrees to do so.

Tweedledum:  
One of the twins that [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) meets in the Fourth Square. He and his brother, [**Tweedledee**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/tweedledee), are fat and in most ways, are identical in appearance and manner. Tweedledum is quick to anger and becomes incensed when he discovers that Tweedledee broke his favorite new rattle. He insists that they duel over it and forces Alice to help both of them put on pillows, rugs, and linens as armor.

The Unicorn:  
A pompous and self-important unicorn in the Sixth Square who spends his time fighting with the [**Lion**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters) for the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king)'s crown. He likes bragging about his fighting prowess and making the White King uncomfortable by making snide comments about winning the crown. He's disgusted at first to meet [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice), as he thought that children were just "fabulous monsters," but he finds her intriguing after their introduction.

Hatta:  
One of the [**White King**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-king)'s messengers. When [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) and the reader meet Hatta, he recently got out of jail and is still sad about it. He cries, sips tea, and is silent unless he has to speak. The illustrations and endnotes in the book reveal that Hatta is an incarnation of the Mad Hatter from [***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland***](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/alice-s-adventures-in-wonderland).

The Fawn:  
A young fawn that travels through the forest in which travelers forget all nouns, including their names. [**Alice**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/alice) and the Fawn get through the forest together but on the other side, the Fawn remembers who it is and that it should fear a human like Alice. Alice is saddened when the Fawn runs away.

The Sheep:  
The [**White Queen**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-looking-glass/characters/the-white-queen) turns into the Sheep in the Fifth Square. The Sheep is elderly and knits with 14 pairs of knitting needles at once. She continues to knit and shouts rowing terms as Alice rows along a river. She meanly laughs at Alice when Alice doesn't understand the rowing terms.