



The Theme of Growing up and Identity Crisis in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Alice in Wonderland, a classic of children literature, is often regarded as psychological and philosophical metaphors and as literary parody. Widely translated, quoted and adapted for various media, the book provoked enough fascination among children and critics alike. It was an enormous success. The reason for its unexpected popularity was that it was published at a time when most children's books were designed to instruct rather than entertain. Alice's chaotic nonsense world provides an exhaustible mine of literary, philosophical and scientific themes. One of the most obvious themes found is the theme of growing up and identity crisis. Alice's experiences in Wonderland can be taken as a metaphor for the experience of growing up, both in terms of physically growing up and coming to understand the world of adults.*

Lewis Carroll's richly imaginative fantasy stories *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are considered as classics of children literature. They have earned a reputation as serious works of art. The stories often say to us more than Carroll meant them to say. Alice's dream-world adventures have been read by many scholars as political, psychological and philosophical metaphors and also as literary parodies. Widely translated, quoted and adapted for various media, the Alice books are among enduring classics whose ideas, disguised as nonsense are provocative enough to fascinate critics and philosophers alike.

Lewis Carroll is the penname of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, an English writer. A confirmed bachelor, Carroll liked to entertain young girls with his story-telling. He invented toys, mathematical games, and puzzles for their enjoyment and maintained a whimsical correspondence with young girls throughout his life. Carroll felt strongly about Alice, his real-life child-friend, growing up. *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* must have some correspondence with that fact.

Alice in Wonderland was an enormous success, and the demand for the book exceeded all expectation. The reason for the enormous popularity of the book was that it was published at a time when most children's books were designed to instruct rather than entertain. Throughout Carroll's life the Alice books received little serious critical attention. In 1930s, Carroll was rediscovered by eminent critics and they started examining Carroll's treatment of space, time, logic, lawlessness, and individual identity. Since then *Alice in Wonderland* has become one of the most widely interpreted pieces of literature. Victorians praised Carroll's word-play and brilliant use of language. Since 1960, Alice has been the star of endless screen, television, and radio productions around the world. Poems and songs in the Alice books have been given new melodies by modern composers.

Gilbert K. Chesterton, the famous English critic pleaded not to take Alice too seriously. Writing in 1932, on the hundred-year anniversary of Lewis Carroll's birth, Chesterton voiced his "dreadful fear" that Alice's story had already fallen under the heavy hands of the scholars and was be-

coming "cold and monumental like a classic tomb". "Poor, poor, little Alice!" bemoaned G. K. "She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others. Alice is now not only a schoolgirl but a schoolmistress." Chesterton may be right that by analyzing a book meant for children, we are getting far-fetched conclusions and thereby making it burdensome instead of enjoyable for children. But no joke is funny unless you see the point of it, and sometimes a point has to be explained. In the case of Alice, we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of nineteenth century. The worst part of it is that some of the jokes of Carroll could be understood only by the residents of Oxford and some private jokes by the Liddell girls only.

Alice's chaotic nonsense world provides an inexhaustible mine of literary, philosophical and scientific themes. One of the most obvious themes found in both the Alice books is the theme of growing up and identity crisis. Alice's experiences in *Wonderland* can be taken as a metaphor for the experience of growing up, both in terms of physically growing up and coming to understand the world of adults and how that world differs from a child's expectation of it. Alice growing and shrinking into different sizes could reflect the ups and downs of adolescence with young people sometimes feeling adult and sometimes quite the opposite. The physical changes can be both frightening and exhilarating. -

Carroll admired the unprejudiced and innocent way young children approach the world. With the book, Carroll wanted to describe how a child sees our adult world as *Wonderland*- full of chaos and lacking in logic. The story represents the child's struggle to survive in the confusing world of adults. To understand the adult world, Alice has to overcome the open-mindedness that is characteristic of children. Adults need rules to live by. But most people adhere to the blindly without asking themselves why. This leads to the incomprehensibility and sometimes arbitrary behaviour that Alice experiences in *Wonderland*.

All the characters figuring in *Wonderland* are ones that Alice creates in her dream-world and they may satirize adults that Alice comes across in her daily life who affects her

one way or another, e.g. tutors, parents, acquaintances etc. Alice even takes on characteristics of adult behaviour to master uncomfortable situations. When she shows up uninvited to the tea-party at the March Hare's house, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare tell her that there is no room for her, however Alice sees many empty seats. Contradicting them, she sits down in a large armchair at one end of the table, a position customary for the person of highest rank. By choosing to sit there she consciously assumes authority over the party. She is also treated like an adult by the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. She is offered wine, an adult drink, by the March Hare who looks for wine on the table and cannot see anything but tea.

Carroll felt strongly about Alice, his real-life child-friend, growing up. Alice's Adventure in Wonderland must have some correspondence with that fact. Throughout her journey in Wonderland, Alice learns to cope with the crazy rules that often don't make sense. She begins managing the situations in a more adult like fashion. She stands up to the queen and begins to take control. Little by little, she begins to lose her imagination of a child and sees things for what they really are. She realizes that the creatures of Wonderland are nothing but playing cards. In the end, Alice has adapted and lost most of her vivid imagination that comes with childhood. She realizes that the creatures in Wonderland really are nothing but a pack of cards. At this point, she has matured too much to stay in Wonderland, the world of children, and wakes up into the "real" world, the world of adults.

In Wonderland, Alice feels lost both, physically and psychologically. She is constantly ordered to identify herself by the creatures she meets. She herself has doubts about her identity. After falling through the rabbit-hole, she tests her knowledge to determine whether she has become another girl. She cannot get her recitations right, and she becomes even more confused when her arithmetic fails her. Every attempt to establish a familiar basis of identity only emphasizes the sense of being lost. Trapped in solitude, she finds herself lapsing into soliloquies that reflect a divided, confused, and desperate self. The White rabbit mistakes her for his maid Mary Ann.

Later on in her adventures, Alice meets the Caterpillar who asks who she is. She has hard time answering that question and becomes irritated by him. She explains to him that she knew who she was when she woke up that morning but that she had changed several times since then, and at that time she does not know. Alice equates Wonderland with a realm of transformation where she chooses to stay until she either turns into somebody else or is given an identity. A pigeon mistakes her for a serpent because of her long neck, and accused her of wanting to steal its eggs. The Cheshire Cat does not question her name or species, he is questioning her sanity. As she has entered Wonderland, she must be mad, he states. It is, however, not only Alice's identity that is unstable; some creatures in Wonderland have unstable identities as well. For example, the Duchess's baby turns into a pig and the members of the jury have to write down their names or they will forget them.

Insecure about her identity, Alice relates height to maturity. In a shrunken state, Alice allows herself to feel frustrated and nervous. She feels free to cry as these actions fit into her definitions of child behaviour. Many times Alice acts as a seven-year old, but occasionally she takes on an adolescent's mindset or in extreme cases the one of an adult. She strives for stability concerning her identity, but the strenuous swinging in size and life phases inflicts considerable confusion on her. She seeks confirmation from others. She very much wants someone else to tell her who she is and if she likes the answer, she would like to return to the normal world; otherwise she figures she might as well stay in Wonderland. In contrast, at the end of her dream, she does not need others to tell who she is. Alice ends up growing naturally, outgrowing all the other characters at the trial.

At the beginning of her journey, Alice shows little sign of progress in terms of learning. She keeps committing the same mistakes by insulting her fellow characters one after another. As she proceeds on her journey, she gradually learns to control and regulate her emotional outbursts. The fact that Alice is small with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle shows that she has undergone a psychological development in terms of maturity. She pities the Mock Turtle for his heartbreaking sorrow. She is more sensitive now to the emotional needs of others. She learns from her mistakes gradually. Being able to take control of the situation at the end of the novel allows Alice to make conscious choices regarding her role in the events and make a stand towards people who she thinks are unjust. At the end, she defies the authorities. After all the turmoil that has been around her, Alice wakes up from her dream, back to the simplicities of her childhood in Victorian England. Alice's adventures in Wonderland reflect the child-adult conflict of Alice on her inner quest for identity. The first step into adulthood includes not only psychological growth as in maturity but also physical growth; to grow is to grow up. She does not seem to have high regards of adults; she considers them to be unreliable, unfair and judgmental. Maybe she suspects that one day she too will become like them.

REFERENCE

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