

Original Articles

EDUCATING ALICE: THE LESSONS OF *WONDERLAND*

by Jan Susina

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)¹ has frequently been celebrated as a ground-breaking text that liberated nineteenth-century children's books from the didacticism which burdened earlier forms of children's literature. F. J. Harvey Darton in *Children's Books in England*² has suggested that *Wonderland* changed 'the whole cast of children's literature' (p. 252) while Percy Muir in *English Children's Books*³ sees *Wonderland* as such a pivotal text that he dates children's books as 'From Harris To "Alice"' and 'After Carroll' (pp 100, 148).

Rather than a radical departure from the tradition of literary fairy tales for children, *Wonderland* is a part of the well-established British tradition of didacticism for children. In composing his fairy tale, Carroll uses both his imagination and the belief that children's fiction ought to be entertaining as well as edifying. Although *Wonderland* does not provide the same overt sort of moralizing and conventional piety as does Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863)⁴ or MacDonald's *Dealings with the Fairies* 1867,⁵ it does contain a number of social lessons for its younger readers.

Lessons and rules abound in *Wonderland*, which is curious for a book frequently praised by critics as being nondidactic. Even Alice realizes this: 'How the creatures order one about, and make one repeat lessons!...I might just well be at school at once' (p. 82). Alice is constantly referring to her lessons whether they be geography, mathematics, history, foreign languages, or natural science. She is frequently being given advice by the Caterpillar, the Duchess, the Hatter and the Mock Turtle and even herself, 'though she very seldom followed it' (p. 12).

Alice is an exceptionally articulate seven-year-old. She is seldom shy in displaying her accumulated, although imperfect, knowledge. Alice is a bit too pleased with herself, and is just as apt to give a recitation whether or not there is an audience. The narrator notes that Alice recites bits and pieces from her geography lessons while falling through the rabbit-holes:

though this was not a *very* good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over...(p.8).

She uses her lessons as a form of self-validation, a sort of 'I can recite, therefore I am.'

'I'm sure I can't be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little!' (p. 16).

Alice uses her knowledge as a marker of social status. When she engages the Duchess in conversation, Alice is 'glad to get the opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge.' (p.48) Her education is shown to have little to do with understanding a subject but rather with making one feel superior to someone else. So while *Wonderland* is a book full of conversations — 'and what is the use of a book... without pictures or conversations?' (p.71 — there is very little communication. The game of 'who knows more' is constantly being played in the Mouse's history lesson, the Hatter's riddles, the Caterpillar's questioning, and the moralizing of the Duchess.

What is curious about *Wonderland* is the absence of the religious sentiment and moralizing which is so evident in those fairy tales by Kingsley, MacDonald and other writers of the genre. It is certainly not that Carroll was any less concerned with morality and upbringing of children. Carroll was much more orthodox and conventional than Kingsley or MacDonald in his religious beliefs and did not question the basic tenets of Victorian Christianity.

Much of his other writing for children is conventionally didactic, most notably the fairy tale 'Bruno's Revenge' (1867) and the lengthy *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893). After the popular success of *Wonderland*, Carroll began to insert into subsequent editions and his other works for children introductory material which is as didactic as anything produced by Kingsley or MacDonald. Such insertions as his 'An Easter Greeting to Every Child Who Loves Alice' (1876), 'A Christmas Greeting (From a Fairy to a Child)' (1884) (which were also sold independently as pamphlets), and 'Who Will Riddle Me the How and the Why?' (Preface to *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* 1886), are full of Victorian piety. The religious tone of these pieces is typified by the following selection from 'Easter Greeting':

Are these strange words from a writer of such tales as 'Alice'? And is this a strange letter to find in a book of nonsense? It may be so. Some perhaps may blame me for thus mixing together things grave and gay; others may smile and think it odd that anyone should speak of solemn things at all, except in church and on a Sunday: but I think — nay, I am sure — that some children will read this gently and lovingly, and in the spirit in which I have written it.

For I do not believe God means us thus to divide life into two halves — to wear a grave face on Sunday and to think it out-of-place to even so much as mention Him on a week-day.

Carroll's writing for children gradually became more didactic in tone and imbued with moral earnestness, although Morton Cohen⁶ suggests that 'the moral tone is always present' (p.8) in Carroll's writing, even in early stories and verses that he wrote as a child for his family magazines *The Rectory Umbrella* (1848) and *Mischmasch* (1855-62). This change is not so much one in terms of attitude — Carroll did not greatly modify his religious beliefs during his career — as it is a recognition of the audience that was reading his children's books.

Carroll originally composed *Wonderland* for Alice and her sisters, the daughters of Henry George Liddell, the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and undoubtedly felt there was little need to preach to them. Nor would it be considered appropriate to put himself in the delicate situation of writing a tale which sought to tell the daughters of his superior how they ought to behave morally. Once *Wonderland* had expanded into the popular market with the People's Edition (1887), he began including the religious introductory material. Since he was reaching a much wider audience than he had anticipated — the first edition of *Wonderland* was published on commission by Macmillan — he sought in later editions to combine his fame as a writer of children's stories with his need to preach the gospel.

Many critics have pointed to Carroll's parodies of Robert Southey 'You Are Old Father William' and Isaac Watts 'How Doth the Little Crocodile' as confirmation of Carroll's strongly anti-didactic stance. Yet we know from his letters and diaries that Carroll agreed with the sentiments expressed in the original poems. He objected not so much to the content but to the manner in which teachers and parents forced young children to memorize instructional verse with the vain belief that it would somehow morally improve the child.

By 1865, the two poems by Watts, 'Against Idleness and Mischief' and 'The Sluggard,' were 150 years old and would not in themselves hold much interest for most Victorian seven-year-olds. By the time that Alice Liddell was forced to memorize them, they had become little more than doggerel. Carroll's imitations are more akin to a silly reworking of over-familiar songs such as 'Jingle Bells' or 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' which closely follow the original text but are hardly intended as a critique of the original.

Carroll suggests that when a dutiful child, such as Alice, is forced to memorize such verses, she is more concerned with the recitation than with the content of the poem. Each time she recites, Alice realizes something is not right, but as the Gryphon points out 'She can't explain it' (p. 83) because she really is more preoccupied with presenting the poem than understanding it.

The same lack of comprehension is evident in her lessons. While Alice frequently shows off her knowledge, it is usually scrambled. As the narrator observes, 'Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude

swarm of excited children, as she gives each one a piece from her box of comfits. Alice is clearly the mother handing out comfits/comfort to her children. The animals respond exactly like children: the older ones complain of the taste, while the smaller ones choke and must be patted on the back like infants by Alice. Once their taste for sweets is satisfied, these animals, like young children, demand a story.

Although the Dodo announces that everyone has won and all must have prizes, this is not the case. Alice, like a good self-sacrificing Victorian mother that she becomes at the conclusion of *Wonderland*, is expected to give without asking for anything in return. In providing the prizes to others, Alice begins to learn her lesson of self-sacrifice: it is better to give than to receive.

While Alice gives comfit/comfort to others, she is presented a thimble, a symbolic introduction to the domestic nature of Victorian motherhood. The children are rewarded with sweets, while Alice is rewarded with the sweetness of working with others.

This role is confirmed in the scene when Alice enters the Duchess' house. In the kitchen, the only episode in *Wonderland* where all the key characters are female, Alice is confronted with two extreme versions of women: the busy cook, sweating over the stove (the domestic realm) and the haughty Duchess dressed in her finery preparing for the croquet match with the Queen (the social realm). What is missing is the role of the mother, which is literally thrust upon Alice — “‘Here! You may nurse it a bit, if you like!’” the Duchess said to Alice, flinging the baby at her as she spoke’ (p.49). It is a role that Alice willingly accepts. Concerned for the child's safety, Alice takes the child away with her, which prepares the reader for the conclusion of *Wonderland* with Alice surrounded by loving children.

The final glimpse of Alice is of a woman who has retained her ‘simple and loving heart of childhood’ (p.99) capable of identifying with the ‘simple sorrows’ and ‘simple joys’ of the children that flock around her. One wonders if she also remains as simple-minded as she appears in her adventures. Despite her education, Alice's knowledge is decidedly broad but shallow; she is much more concerned with ‘grand words to say’ than with understanding. Carroll seems to place much more emphasis on her emotional and nurturing abilities than on any skills that might suggest a wider sphere of influence outside of the home.

It is because *Wonderland* supports rather than challenges many of the values of Victorian society in a charming and entertaining manner that it became such a popular book for the upper-middle and middle classes during the period. Carroll shifted the context of his fairy tale from religious to social lessons. The lack of religious moralizing, while important, is much more the result of the specific audience to whom Carroll was directing his text — the Liddells and

later the upper-middle class — than any clear sense of separating education from entertainment. It is the middle class represented by Alice and what Hubert Nicholson⁷ has characterised as her 'manners of the drawing-room' (p.7) that triumph over the apparent formlessness of Wonderland. Carroll's emphasis on order, the importance of lessons and rules, and the need to adjust into society made the text popular with parents who gave it to their children.

Alice learns from the Queen's croquet game the need and importance of rules and order. As Alice suggests, it is 'a very difficult game indeed' (p.66) when played with live flamingoes as mallets, hedgehogs as croquet balls and soldiers acting as arches. Significantly, she complains 'they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them' (p.67).

Alice is well aware of the need for rules in even something as simple as a croquet game. In the opening chapter, the narrator notes that Alice had once boxed her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet. Carroll, the consummate puzzle and game maker, firmly believed in the importance of rules and order. While *Wonderland* may appear on the surface to be random, chaotic and nightmarish, it, like a puzzle, must be carefully pieced together to discover its inherent pattern and its demand for rules and lessons.

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