

"Why is a Raven like a Writing-Desk?": The Play of Letters in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books

by Jan Susina

"I think, I should understand that better," Alice said very politely, "if I had it written down: but I can'n't quite follow it as you say it." (Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* 81)

Although, strictly speaking, neither Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) nor *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) is an epistolary novel, letters and references to letter writing appear frequently in both. Like Beatrix Potter's famous illustrated letter to Noel Moore that eventually became *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Carroll's *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (1863)—the handwritten and self-illustrated manuscript that he presented to Alice Liddell on November 26, 1864, and later revised to become *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—is nothing more than an elaborately illustrated letter.






















Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was created by a man obsessed with the letters of the alphabet and the process of letter writing. Carroll once wrote in a letter to Marion Terry that "Life seems to go in letter writing, and I'm beginning to think that the proper definition of 'Man' is 'an animal who writes letters'" (*Letters* II, 663). As a successful writer of children's books, Carroll was ultimately able to resign his mathematical lectureship at Christ Church, Oxford, in 1881 to become, literally, a man of letters. It is worth recalling that "Lewis Carroll" is really just a literary construct, a clever reordering of his proper name, "Charles Lutwidge Dodgson." Carroll created this pseudonym by Latinizing his first and middle names and reversing their order. In 1853, he provided Edmund Yates, the editor of *The Train*, with two other possible pseudonyms based on anagrams of the letters in "Charles Lutwidge": "Edgar Cuthwellis" and "Edgar U.C. Westhill."

Just as Carroll's letters and "Register of Letters" were the basis for the composition of his *Diaries*, Carroll's letters and his letter writing, I submit, influenced the composition of the *Alice* books. I will then argue in the second half of this essay that a possible solution to the famous riddle posed by the Mad Hatter can be found both in Carroll's playful rearrangement of letters and in his profound interest in letters and letter writing.

Carroll the Letter Writer

Carroll was a systematic record-keeper. As a young man, he devised a "Register of Letters," which included a

short summary of each letter along with its date and an entry number. He began his "Register" in 1861 and maintained it for the following thirty-seven years, ultimately recording that he'd written 98,721 letters (Collingwood 266). Although his complete "Register of Letters" has not survived, Carroll's nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood—whose biography of his uncle is appropriately titled *The Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1898)—claims that it consisted of several volumes. While the "Register" has vanished, many of Carroll's letters have survived. Early editions of Carroll's letters include Collingwood's *Life and Letters* (1898), which reproduces 117 letters, and Evelyn M. Hatch's *A Selection from the Let-*

The 
 My  Ina,
 Though  don't give
 birthday presents, still 
 April
 ... write a birthday 
 June
 came 2 your  2
 wish U many happy returns
 of the day,  the  met
 me,  took me for a 
 hunted me  and
 till  could hardly 
 However somehow  got
 into the ,  there
 a  met me,  took me
 for  a , and pelted me

A rebus letter to Georgina Watson

ters of Lewis Carroll to His Child-friends (1933) with 170 letters. Morton Cohen's more recent two-volume edition of *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1978), now the standard edition of Carroll's letters, is nearly 1200 pages and contains only a selection of 1350 letters from the 4000 that Cohen located. Cohen argues that Carroll was "one of the world's most prolific letter-writers" and estimates that Carroll wrote at least two thousand letters a year, around six a day (xvi). In a letter to Christina Rossetti, Carroll mentions that it was the thirteenth letter he has written that day and apologizes for its brevity (*Letters I*, 465). One of his diary entries mentions "having done a huge quantity of letter writing, and worked off some arrears that have been standing over some years" (*Diaries II*, 395). Elsewhere in his diary, he writes, "Wrote letters all morning. Other writing is falling into the background" (II, 409). Thus, his estimation in another letter to Arthur Lewis that "one-third of life seems to go in receiving letters, and the other two-thirds in answering them," seems to be no exaggeration (*Letters I*, 336).

Eventually letters became Carroll's preferred method of communication (Wakeling vi). Jean Gattegno takes this observation even further and argues that, for Carroll, "writing became more and more the only conceivable method of communication" (61). The first edition of *Looking-Glass* includes Carroll's peritextual letter, "To All Child Readers of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,'" while his "An Easter Greeting to Every Child who Loves 'Alice'" was inserted into *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (1886), *The Nursery Alice* (1889), and later editions of *Looking-Glass*. Carroll's "Easter Greeting," like "To All Child Readers," is in the form of a letter and begins:

Dear Child,
Please to fancy, if you can, that you are reading
a real letter from a real friend. (248)

Carroll seems to have viewed his children's books as a logical extension of the letters he wrote to children, just as the handwritten text of *Under Ground* created for Alice Liddell evolved into the published *Wonderland*. Carroll's illustrated letters to children are full of jokes and word play and closely resemble both the form and content of his children's books. Indeed, Alice's famous observation, "and what is the use of a book...without pictures or conversation?," can be applied to the letters written to his child friends (*Wonderland* 9). His rebus letter to Georgina Watson, his spiral letter to Agnes Hull, the *Looking-Glass* letter to Daisy Brough—written entirely in reverse—and the fairy letter to Dymphna Ellis—written in handwriting so small that one needs a magnifying glass to read it—are just some of the many examples of his letters that, like his children's novels, combine visual and

verbal humor (*Letters I*, 142-43, 315, 516-17, 108-09).

These elaborately designed letters also suggest that Carroll was as much concerned with the form of the letter as its content. His careful attention to the design and production values of his children's books is well known. Carroll's correspondence with his publisher, Alexander Macmillan, is so extensive that Cohen has collected and published it in a separate volume, *Lewis Carroll and the House of Macmillan* (1987). Carroll's interest in the art of writing letters is evident in his "The Wonderland Postage-Stamp Case," which was accompanied by his short pamphlet, *Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-writing* (1890). This pamphlet is divided into four sections and provides twelve rules for successful letter writing that range from "Write legibly" (*Letters II*, 1159) to "Be sure you exaggerate enough to make the jesting obvious" (*Letters II*, 1160). Carroll concludes the booklet with the recommendation that everyone use a "Register of Letters."

Throughout Carroll's *Diaries*, it becomes clear that he often refers to his "Register of Letters" as a key reference tool to help compose his entries. While there are frequent breaks in his diary entries—he notes in one, "I have almost fallen out of the habit of journal-keeping altogether"—he never took a break from writing letters (*Diaries II*, 264).

Letters as Games

I would like to suggest that Carroll's letters, particularly those written to children, are often intended as word games between two partners. Both *Alice* books reveal Carroll's appreciation of letters. At the beginning of the second chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice is beginning to open up like a telescope, she wonders how she will ever be able to put on her shoes and stockings. She decides that in order to keep on good terms with her feet, she will need to send by carrier a new pair of boots every Christmas. She then composes a short note which is typographically inscribed in the text:

Alice's Right Foot, Esq.
Hearthrug
near the Fender,
(with Alice's love). (*Wonderland* 17)

This is a cleverly disguised footnote and one of many examples of Carroll's use of puns in the text.

Carroll's most famous reference in *Wonderland* to letters and letter writing is the riddle posed by the Mad Hatter, "Why is a raven like a writing-desk?" (60). Carroll explains in the "Preface to Eighty-Sixth Thousand of the 6/- Edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*" (1896) that originally he had created the riddle without an answer, but since he received many letters from readers requesting an

their formal education at home under the supervision of a governess. Lecerclé goes on to point out that schools are also the source of rules of grammar and good behavior. He could have added that the public school was also the source of letter writing since it was at schools that young boys often separated for the first time from their families and so developed the habit of letter writing. In fact, the first complete letter composed by then eleven-year-old Carroll was written home to his sisters from the Richmond School (*Letters I*, 5).



The two Anglo-Saxon messengers, Haigha and Hatta, from *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, illus. John Tenniel

The Mad Hatter's riddle is certainly not like the "tremendously easy riddles" that Alice poses to Humpty Dumpty in *Looking-Glass* (186). Indeed, Frances Huxley has devoted *The Raven and the Writing Desk* (1976) to unraveling this one riddle, even suggesting that Carroll's proposed solution is nothing more than "a put-on" (21). Following Alice's procedure, which was "to think over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn't much," I want to speculate on the possible connection between these two seemingly dissimilar objects and suggest that the solution may very well have to do with Carroll's own letter writing (*Wonderland* 62).

Ravens have a rich history in folklore. They are, as Bernd Heinrich points out in *Ravens in Winter* (1989), considered to be "the brains of the bird world" and have long held a reputation for cleverness, wisdom, and loquaciousness (20). In many mythologies, ravens are messengers who have the ability to speak and understand human language (Armstrong 78). For example, in Norse mythology, Odin, the chief God, keeps two ravens perched on his shoulders, one named Hugin (Thought) and the other Munin (Memory). They were sent out at dawn to gather

news from around the world and report back to Odin (Heinrich 21). He was known as the raven god because of these messengers who flew throughout the world recording information for him. Just like Hugin and Munin, Odin's two ravens, "thought" and "memory" are useful companions at any writing-desk.

Thomas Carlyle's first lecture in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* (1841) deals with "The Hero as Divinity" and focuses on Odin. Carlyle claims that Odin invented letters and poetry and suggests that runes or the alphabet were "the greatest invention man has ever made, this of marking down the unseen thought that is in him by written characters" (264). Odin's ability to read the runes is akin to puzzling out the mysteries of a riddle.

Thus, it is notes or letters of the alphabet that form the connection between ravens and writing-desks. A writing-desk, unlike a writing-table, is small and portable and allows the writer to remain standing and in motion while composing. Carroll did much of his writing while standing at his writing-desk, and one can imagine that the action of the pen in hand, as well as the movement of his other free hand, resembled the motions of flapping wings. Dressed in his somber, black clerical outfit, Carroll might have indeed resembled a tall, angular raven. Letters certainly flew off Carroll's writing desk at an astonishing rate, like the ravens gliding off Odin's shoulder. The riddle also helps to explain the appearance of the Anglo-Saxon messengers, Haigha (pronounced to rhyme with mayor) and Hatta, who appear in *Looking-Glass*, and their curious "Anglo-Saxon attitudes" (200). Robert Sutherland has called Haigha and Hatta "a vexed problem which will remain obscure until further information comes to light" (138). I would like to suggest that the Mad Hatter's riddle in *Wonderland* in its form and content can also shed light on the riddle of the Anglo-Saxon messengers of *Looking-Glass*.

The White King explains to Alice that he has two messengers: "One to fetch, and one to carry" (*Wonderland* 200). Tenniel's illustrations reveal that Haigha and Hatta are the March Hare and the Mad Hatter, the originator of the writing-desk riddle, just as their names are Anglo-Saxon versions of their second names. The Anglo-Saxon messengers function very much in the manner of Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), Odin's two ravens, in providing the White King with information.

Moreover, Odin lost the use of his right eye in order to learn how to read the runes. Curiously, Carroll had poor vision in his right eye (Huxley 79), and John Tenniel, the illustrator of the *Alice* books, lost his sight in his right eye in a fencing accident with his father, who was a dancing and fencing master (Hancher xvi). In *Wonderland*, when the King of Hearts attempts to make sense of the mysterious unsigned letter that appears as a piece of evidence at the trial, it turns out not only to be a letter, but also a riddle

in verse. As the King tries to interpret the verse, "They Told Me You Had Been to Her," he examines it with one eye in the manner of Odin unraveling the poetic runes. Furthermore, Carroll's most famous nonsense poem, "Jabberwocky," which is subsequently explained by Humpty Dumpty in *Looking-Glass*, first appeared in 1855 in the family magazine *MischMasch* under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry" (139-40). Alice and the White King also engage in the riddling game, "I love my love with an H," which is similar to the Dormouse's monologue of drawing "everything that begins with an M" at the Mad Tea Party, a list that does include "Memory" and might very well include "Mind," had he not dozed off (139-40, 67).

Carroll had a serious interest in Anglo-Saxon language and literature. Sutherland suggests that there are "recurrent allusions to Old English language and Anglo-Saxon culture throughout his life" (34). Lecercle has noted that Anglo-Saxon philology was "not only an essential subject" of academic discussion during Carroll's tenure at Oxford, but that it was also "a field of scientific controversy" with Oxford being the center for the great Anglo-Saxon debates of the 1830s (198). Harry Morgan Ayres has even proposed that Carroll might have had the nineteenth-century scholar of Saxon runes, Daniel Henry Haigh, in mind and might have been poking fun at Anglo-Saxon scholarship of the Victorian period when he named the Anglo-Saxon messengers (67-68). However, I would argue that the Mad Hatter's riddle has a more fitting Anglo-Saxon source in the riddles of the *Exeter Book*, an anthology that includes ninety Old English riddles and one Latin riddle. Composed in the first half of the eighth century, the *Exeter Book* is one of the best-known collections of Anglo-Saxon riddles. The first serious study of the *Exeter Book* was Benjamin Thorpe's *Codex Exoniensis: A Collection of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1842). The first systematic attempt to solve all the riddles in the *Exeter Book* was the series of articles by Franz Dietrich published in 1859 and 1865 (Williamson, *Feast* 6). Prior to the publication of *Wonderland* in 1865, the *Exeter Book* seemed to contain some riddles without answers. While Craig Williamson argues there is no basis to assume that these riddles were derived from a common practice of "social riddling in Anglo-Saxon England," the characters at the Mad Tea Party, who subsequently reappear as the Anglo-Saxon messengers, certainly engage in this sort of riddle-contest (*Exeter* 26). Williamson sees the Anglo-Saxon riddle as more a form of literary game than as a part of the oral tradition (*Feast* 26). Two of the riddles from the *Exeter Book* have "inkwell" or "inkhorn" as the solution: "Riddle 89" has the inkwell fixed on a wooden table and features a quill made from a raven's feather, which seems like the Anglo-Saxon equivalent to a Victorian writing-desk (Williamson, *Feast* 152, 217). Playing on the literary tradition of the Anglo-Saxon riddle in a

letter to Marion Richards, Carroll jokingly transforms himself into an inkstand:

What with teaching, and looking over answers to questions, and writing lecture-business, and letters, sometimes I get *that* confused. I hardly know which is me and which is the inkstand. Pity me, my dear child! The confusion in one's *mind* doesn't so much matter—but when it comes to putting bread-and-butter, and orange marmalade into the *inkstand*; and then dipping pens into *oneself*, and filling *oneself* up with ink, you know it's horrid. (*Letters* I, 440)

In another letter inviting Dorothy Joy Poole to dinner, Carroll mentions that, while most of his guests prefer lemonade, he can provide a number of other beverages, including ink (*Letters* II, 1102).

The Raven and the Writing-Desk: A Correspondence

Letter writing really did become Carroll's lifeblood, an essential aspect of daily life and his chief source of emotional and intellectual nourishment. Given his pen-



The Fish-Footman presents a letter to the Frog-Footman from Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, illus. John Tenniel

chant for nursery rhymes, one can well imagine Carroll's solution to the well-known nursery rhyme:

If all the world were paper
And all the sea were ink,
If all the trees were bread and cheese,
What should we have to drink? (Opie 436)

When the White King faints in *Looking-Glass*, Alice attempts to revive him with a bottle of ink—perhaps Carroll's liquid of choice. He then recovers and almost immediately begins writing in his memorandum-book (132-33). Carroll's definition of Man as the animal who writes letters certainly has an autobiographical ring to it.

The best-known authorial self-portrait that appears in *Wonderland* is that of the foolish and overly wordy Dodo. More accurately, it is a self-portrait of Charles Dodgson, rather than Lewis Carroll. Dodgson was the self-conscious mathematics professor who frequently stuttered and would even stumble over his own last name and pronounced it "Dodo...Dodgson" (Gardner 27). Carroll even signed the dedication copy of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* that he gave to Robinson Duckworth, "The Duck from the Dodo, 9 June 1887," since Robinson accompanied Dodgson and the three Liddell sisters on the famous boating trip of 1862 when the first oral version of *Wonderland* was presented (*Letters I*, 61). Just as *Wonderland* was gradually revised from oral to printed form, Carroll recast himself from the ineffective speaker, the Dodo, to the accomplished and witty writer, the Raven. While the novel may have had its origins as an oral tale that Dodgson or the Dodo spontaneously spun for Alice and her sisters, the published version of *Wonderland*, which introduces a series of new characters and scenes including the Mad Tea Party and Mad Hatter's riddle, is much more a carefully constructed text by Carroll, or the Raven, that has been consciously created on a writing desk.

The most overt appearance of a letter in *Wonderland* occurs when Alice observes the Fish-Footman deliver to the Frog-Footman the invitation of the Duchess to play croquet with the Queen. Tenniel's illustration emphasizes the exchange of the letter from sender to receiver. In many ways, this episode embodies Carroll's attitude toward letters and letter writing, specifically toward those letters that he wrote to children. It is significant that the letter is an invitation to play a game since Carroll's letters are essentially a spirited game of word play between two partners. Moreover, Carroll concludes *Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-writing*, his guide to letter writing, with a reference to Edmund Hoyle, who, in *The Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* (1742), provides "one golden Rule, 'when in doubt, win the trick,'" which Carroll then argues can be applied to life (1168). Like the game of croquet in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the writing of letters is a game played

with live things—"a very difficult game indeed" (74). Undoubtedly, many of Carroll's child correspondents felt the same since this game of letter writing pitted the verbally astute Carroll against young children, which might have felt somewhat like Alice trying to play croquet with the Red Queen, who "keeps quarreling with the other players and shouting, 'Off with his head!' or 'Off with her head!'" (Carroll, *Wonderland* 82).

Carroll's letter writing is a game that is intimately connected to his children's books, since his letters are frequently coupled with a presentation copy or an offer to send a copy to the child. His letters use the same comic word play that are found in the *Alice* books and are a continuation of the game begun with the *Alice* books. Thomas Hinde has suggested that Carroll's letters contain the creativity and imagination "at least the equal of those in the *Alice* books" (9). Moreover, Carroll's peritextual letters to his child readers, which accompany later editions of his children's books, help blur the distinctions between book and letter. One might even consider the handwritten copy of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, which Carroll wrote and illustrated for Alice Liddell, an elaborate love letter. It is significant that when he revised *Under Ground* for publication as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, he removed many of the more personal references as well as expanding it and using a professional illustrator. The private letter was thus transformed into the public book.

Kathleen Blake argues that even the utilitarian "The *Wonderland* Postage-Stamp Case," which accompanied *Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter-writing*, illustrates "the confusing tendency of one thing to turn into another" since the inner and outer covers provide "Pictorial Surprises"—Tenniel's illustration of Alice holding the baby is transformed into Alice holding a pig and the Cheshire Cat vanishes (77). Within Carroll's playful approach to language, books and letters become an entertaining game between author and reader in which baby becomes a pig or a raven is like a writing-desk. The stuttering and awkward speaker, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, retreats to his writing-desk, and through the power of letters, is able to transform himself into Lewis Carroll, the clever creator of letters and books. As I suggested earlier, the connection between a raven and writing desk lies in how both are creatures of the runes or letters of the alphabet; both hide meaning playfully beneath the surface. Significantly, the solution that I propose to the Mad Hatter's riddle also points to solving the vexing riddle of the two divergent personalities of Lewis Carroll, the inventive author of children's books, and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the seemingly dull Oxford professor of mathematics. Carroll signed his letters as "Lewis Carroll" and "Charles Lutwidge Dodgson," and on rare occasions as both (*Letters I*, 236-37). Most of his letters written to children are signed "Dodgson" rather than "Carroll." It is in his letters

that the two seemingly distinctive aspects of his personality are united.

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