



How does Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland reflect and ridicule aspects of the Victorian era?

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Abstract

Literature can reflect or ridicule reality and it can also do both. Lewis Carroll's famous children's novel, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is one such example of it. It touches upon aspects of childhood, gender and class in the Victorian society of England while simultaneously providing a fantasy world for its readers. This research paper aims to analyse how the issues of childhood, gender and class are represented in subtle satires, underlying themes and symbols and motifs throughout the plot. Whether it be ridiculing the power struggles in the British monarchy at that time or portraying the justice system's unfair means, Lewis Carroll has done it all while maintaining themes of childhood as Alice journeys through Wonderland.

Introduction

Imagine yourself living in the Victorian era; being trapped in poverty means working in a factory with terrible working conditions or being a servant in someone's household. A poor child will also work in the factory, doing difficult jobs like going underneath a textile machine or being a chimney sweep. The rich, however, do no work and afford luxuries like electricity and gramophones (The School Run). Living in that same environment was a man named Charles Lutwidge Dodgson or better known by his pen name, Lewis Carroll.

The world of literature can either reflect reality or create a parallel universe that one desires to live in - it can either be a mirror of society showing the evils and harsh truths or be an escape into a fantasy world, a utopian paradise to escape reality. Some of the greatest pieces of literature have done both - they show the evils present in society and reflect on contemporary issues while simultaneously providing the readers a fantasy world to escape into through the

characters and the setting. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* does exactly the same. The novel is set in the Victorian Era; a period in British history roughly referred to as the reign of Queen Victoria and marked to be an era where society was mostly class-based (Steinbach).

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ridicules and reflects on the aspects of the Victorian Era. The existential themes in the novel reflect Victorian childhood. Alice's journey in *Wonderland* is her questioning her entire girlhood (Murdoch). From the point of changing physical appearance which is shown by the "eat me" sweets to the culmination of her childhood by Alice slaying the Jabberwocky and turning into a warrior shows how the novel reflects on a myriad of themes and issues. This story also heavily targets the class theme with the first few lines itself identifying Alice as a girl belonging to a certain class - a class which allowed her to spend her days in leisure and education, unlike many of the other Victorian children (Murdoch).

In line with the above, the main aim of this research paper is to conduct a thorough analysis of the novel to answer the question **"How does Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* reflect and ridicule aspects of the Victorian era?"**

An overview of the Victorian era

According to (Steinbach), society in the Victorian era was organized in a distinct hierarchical manner. Race, religion, region and occupation were all meaningful aspects of identity and status, but gender and class were the main organizing principles. It is safe to say that a person's social standing, values and identity as an individual were mainly based on these two characteristics. Your gender and class put you into boxes and categorized you into certain traits you were to possess and dictated how to carry yourself as an individual. In our day and age, such a concept seems restrictive and seems that our freedom and individual expression are being compromised but we must realize that to people at that time it seemed imperative; even necessary to create these "divisions" in society in order for it to more efficiently function. In retrospect, people knowing their roles and responsibilities brought a lot of clarity to society.

As briefly aforementioned, the gender roles during the Victorian era were quite distinct for men and women. Victorian gender ideology was premised on the "doctrine of separate spheres." This meant that the characteristics and traits a specific gender was to have were extremely distinct from what the other was supposed to be. Men were physically stronger, belonged in the public sphere and were meant to participate in politics and paid work while women's roles were quite literally the opposite. They were meant to be weak, stay in the private and run households and families (Steinbach). A patriarchal society existed which did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Women had one main role during their life which was to marry and take part in their husbands' life. Critic Richard D (Altick) states, "a woman was inferior to men in all ways except the unique one that counted most: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded and emphatically not in the world of affairs." But

just as men had expectations from a woman to be the “ideal Victorian woman”; the epitome of innocence and femininity, there were expectations from men as well. Quoting scholar John Tosh, “Becoming a man involved detaching oneself from home and its feminine comforts and achieving ‘a level of material success in the wider world’ including ‘the recognition of manhood by one’s peers” (Ranum). They had to gain respect before marriage as well as impress the rest of society and their own gender.

With regards to the class structure during Victorian society, according to (British Literature Wiki), there were three main classes with subcategories: Upper class, Middle class and lower class. Firstly, the *Upper class* did not perform any manual labour but were landowners and made investments to earn profits. The Upper class was further divided into subcategories of Royals, Middle Upper and Lower Upper. The Middle-Upper were the important officers and lords while the Lower Upper were wealthy men and business owners. Secondly, we can contribute the growth of the *Middle class* to the rapid expansion of the economy and cities. Industrialisation in England led to the growth of a class which was also referred to as the ‘Bourgeoisie’. They had skilled jobs and included merchants and shopkeepers. Occupations such as trade both domestic and overseas flourished which led to new large-scale industries such as railroads, banks and government workers. More labour was needed, and this led to white-collar professions getting the ability to move up and earn higher salaries. This middle class was divided into higher and lower levels. People from the lower level worked for those at the higher level. Lastly, the *Working class* (lower class) were unskilled labourers who worked in unsanitary and harsh conditions. They did not have access to clean food, water, education or proper clothing. They lived on streets or in closed cramped quarters. The Underclass were those who were helpless and dependent on others. The poor and young orphans relied on donations and some women who were unskilled and could not get any jobs had to rely on illegal means. Child labour was rampant and so was crime.

Other than gender and class, there was much going on in Britain during the Victorian era from a political and nationwide standpoint. According to (Blakemore), the House of Commons replaced the House of Lords as the seat of authority during the Victorian era, while the monarchy evolved into a national symbol and the House of Lords lost its influence (though it continued to have an impact until the Parliament Act of 1911). About 600 men, known as members of Parliament (MPs), who were chosen to represent the counties and boroughs of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, made up the House of Commons. Due to its position as the first of these four equal nations, which is the result of tradition, as well as its stronger political strength and riches, England had a far higher number of representatives than the other three countries. Numerous life-tenured noblemen made up most of the higher house, the House of Lords. Both houses were populated by affluent males. The Liberal Party and the Conservative (or Tory) Party were the two main parties that controlled formal national politics. Lord Melbourne, the prime minister, and Albert, who was Victoria's closest political advisor and who some historians assert was "king in all but name," had a significant impact on her early reign. In a time of political turbulence, they worked together to advance a modernization and stability agenda. The reputation of the monarchy had been severely harmed by Victoria's forebears, and the British people clamoured for a republic to take its place. Additionally, the potato famine in Ireland between

1845 and 1852 sparked an open uprising. In order to refute the notion that British royalty wasn't worth the expenditure, Victoria increased the monarch's position in society by promoting charities, the arts, and civic reform. As a result, the queen and her expanding family rose to fame and had a significant impact on pop culture, introducing white bridal dresses and Christmas trees to England. During the early years of her monarchy, Britain was primarily seen as a trade power. But under Victoria, it developed into a strong empire and the most powerful country in the world. It expanded by 10 million square miles and 400 million inhabitants during the 19th century. Gains like this came at a high cost because colonialism carried out in Victoria's name meant harsh subjugation and England was nearly perpetually at war during her reign. Even though Victoria was well-liked, the monarchy reform movement persisted under her leadership. As common British citizens acquired the vote, the secret ballot, and other political reforms in the middle to late 1800s, this ultimately resulted in a reduction in the monarch's direct political influence.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: reflection and ridiculing of the Victorian era

According to (SparkNotes), the story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll starts with a girl named Alice sitting on a riverbank when she spots a White Rabbit in a waistcoat running past her and jumping down a rabbit hole. Alice follows him down the said hole and enters 'Wonderland'. She then proceeds to eat and drink multiple things that manipulate her physical appearance and encounters the Mouse. She meets characters such as the caterpillar and later the Duchess and the grinning Cheshire Cat. The Cheshire Cat explains to Alice that everyone in Wonderland is mad including Alice herself. She then meets the March Hare, the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse. Almost all characters in Wonderland are animals except a few; the Queen of Hearts and the King of Hearts whom she encounters in the palace gardens and plays a most strange game of croquet with. Alice then meets the Mock Turtle with the Gryphon as her escort when the Queen of Hearts tells her that she must hear his story. After listening to the Mock Turtle's story, Alice returns back for the Knave of Heart's trial. When the trial is being led by the King of Hearts, Alice is called to the stand as a witness and new evidence is presented which she calls nonsense. This makes the Queen furious and orders her beheading. Alice in turn grows to a giant size and knocks over the Queen of heart's card army. All of a sudden Alice finds herself awake, lying on the riverbank.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was written in 1862 -1863 in Oxford, England. Many argue that the main character is inspired by Alice Liddell, a young lady who went on a rowing trip on The Isis from Folly Bridge from Oxford to Godstow with her sisters and Lewis Carroll (BBC). Alice was an English woman who in her childhood was an acquaintance and photography subject of Charles Dodgson. However, despite sharing her name with "Alice", (Joyce), the heroine of the story, most scholars disagree with the extent to which the character was based upon her. Regardless of the inspiration behind the main character, the time at which the novel was written was also quite interesting; a lot of advancements were taking place in England in 1862. The Companies Act was established, Habeas Corpus Act was established in British dominions, a new archbishop of Canterbury was succeeded and Princess Alice, the second daughter of Queen Victoria was married to Prince Ludwig of Hesse and by the Rhine. New inventions such as the

Westminster bridge opened along with the Metropolitan Railway, the world's first railway to go underground in London (HistoryWorld). Amongst all these advancements in Victorian society emerged Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But who was actually Lewis Carroll? According to (O'Connor and Robertson), Charles Lutwidge Dodgson or better known by his pseudonym Lewis Carroll was a famous mathematics lecturer and author. He wrote mathematical works under his own name, but published children's works under his pen name. His children's works are distinguished as satire and as examples of verbal wit. The invention of "Lewis Carroll" came about by translating his first name and middle name "Charles Lutwidge" into Latin as "Carolus Lodovicus" and then anglicising and reversing their order.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the novel is how most of Alice's adventures in *Wonderland* are social encounters with unusual, fascinating personalities. These individuals avoid, contradict, and argue against Alice and her understanding of *Wonderland* at all times. As Alice travels throughout the world, she tries to figure out who she is and make sense of her ever-shifting surroundings. Characters that accurately represent the attitudes and personalities of Victorian society are shown to us through Alice's perspective. By extension, we can see that a large portion of *Wonderland* is an effort by Carroll to inform us about the English society he was living in and the individuals who made up it (Braumuller). The Queen of Hearts, for instance, mirrors the characteristics of Queen Margaret of the House of Lancaster. The King of Hearts, on the other hand, is said to be mirroring the aspects of King Henry VI. Henry was described as being occasionally mentally ill, timid, shy, passive, well-intentioned, and opposed to war and violence. Such characteristics can also be seen in The King of Hearts, a ruler whose queen is ruling in his place. The true authority lies with the Queen of Hearts as can be seen by her famous line "Off with their heads!" indicating that she could order executions. Furthermore, Carroll alludes to the War of Roses which took place between the House of Lancaster (red roses) and the House of York (white roses) by incorporating the scene wherein the gardeners are painting the mistakenly planted white roses, red.

At the time this novel was published, the British Empire was busy colonizing new territories in unexplored places such as Asia and Africa. The image of Alice is that of an intrusive outsider who attempts to dominate and modify the new and unfamiliar world rather than accepting it and fitting in. The scene in which Alice pushes the lizard out of the chimney perfectly captures her haughty demeanour, and it serves as a clear allegory for how the British conquerors attempted to take over a foreign territory by either expelling or enslaving its original inhabitants. The tea party, perhaps, also well captures this colonial mindset. Alice decides to attend the strange celebration despite not being invited, which is a clear allusion to the tyrannical mentality of British people who wanted to conquer distant nations in Africa and India without taking the needs of the inhabitants into account. The March Hare's statement that "it wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited" (Carroll) illustrates the locals' displeasure with foreigners and colonists encroaching on their land while also portraying Carroll's view of imperialism as impolite (Farlie).

The trial scene's utter absurdity and confusion towards the book's end satirises the realities of the British court system as well as the class system. The scene shows the King insisting that the jury "consider [their] verdict" before any witnesses or evidence are presented because he is content to let the jury and himself decide the accused's guilt. When he debates arbitrary testimony as "essential" or "unimportant" merely "as if he were trying which term sounded best," he also gives the impression that he has no notion as to what specifics are relevant to the matter at hand. This stupid and illogical behaviour makes fun of the high-ranking British society members in charge of regulating such conversations as well as the absurd justifications for their activities. The injustice of the trial thus exposes the ability of powerful upper-class characters to influence the results of the legal system to their benefit, adding to the frustration of the lower classes - because of their inferior social status, members of the working class frequently endured mistreatment and unfairness inside the legal system. The Hatter, for example, is harshly threatened to give the evidence to the King in an acceptable manner and not to "be frightened" or the King will have him "killed on the spot," which is an obviously absurd demand when he is called as a witness in the trial. The King continuously disparages the Hatter for his social standing, telling him to "step down" at the end of the Hatter's evidence despite the Hatter's repeated claims that he is only "a poor man." The Hatter pleads multiple times. Finding a just trial as a member of the working class became challenging and unrealistic during the Victorian era because British legal systems represented the fact that "there was a deeply rooted middle-class mid-Victorian bias against the character and behaviour of manual workers" (Johnson). Also, the likelihood of common people serving as jurors in a fair trial was diminished by their lack of education. When given the responsibility of choosing the case's outcome, the jurors in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland must write "down their names" on their slates out of "fear they should forget them before the end of the trial". The jurors' stupidity also makes fun of the purported honesty of nineteenth-century British courts, which entrusted such a serious matter to a group of dim-witted citizens unable of comprehending the complexities of their jobs. In the end, the egregiously faulty nature of the British judicial system as a whole "may be argued as having an essentially British approach to life, self-effacing, quirky, egotistical, and possibly autistic" since society intentionally ignores the rot that exists in their way of life. The pointless trial and the outrageous behaviour of everyone involved highlight the theme of insanity that runs through the entire book as a mirror of the subliminal lunacy in the fabric of British society at the time (Zis).

Carroll's novel also reflects and ridicules the education system during the Victorian era. According to (The Victorian School), education at this time was very gender- and social-class-specific. Children in the upper class were raised by a governess when they were very small. Children typically attend a public school after they are around ten years old. Public schools were exclusive and pricey establishments. On the other side, upper-class girls weren't enrolled in public schools. Because staying at home was the most typical course of action for women in Victorian England, they acquired skills that would help them when they were married. We can figure out that Alice was an upper-class girl as the novel starts with her lying idle on the riverbank meaning that she did not have to go to school and was probably taught at home. Furthermore, it was a time when children were discouraged from using their own minds and creativity

and this is seen in the manner that Alice constantly regurgitates facts she has learnt in school without showing any true understanding of them.

Conclusion

The world of literature is incredible, in terms of its ability to reflect the world and at the same time create a parallel universe for its readers. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll does exactly that - it reflects and ridicules certain aspects of Victorian society whilst simultaneously posing as a children's fantasy novel.

The book is filled with a myriad of themes and characters that represent Victorian society. From the reflection of the society which was divided into classes at that time to the existential themes of childhood, gender roles, colonization, and education, a reader is presented with all the aforementioned when reading the novel. Lewis Carroll has also ridiculed various historical characters such as Queen Margaret as the Queen of Hearts and King Henry as the King of Hearts. As Alice travels through Wonderland, her understanding of it evolves. The environment and characters contradict and argue against her understanding just like that of a child journeying through the troublesome path of childhood.

The different themes and subtle elements really make this novel a timeless read still with historical viewpoints. It provides us with a peep into Victorian society through the lens of a girl's adventures in the fantastical universe of Wonderland. Thus, Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ridicules and reflects aspects of Victorian society to a great extent.

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