

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

Lewis Carroll

With an Introduction by Amanda Ryan

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INTRODUCTION

One hundred and fifty years after its publication, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* remains a doozy and a delight for children and adults. The book stands out for many reasons, but is particularly exceptional as an innovative work of nonsense. It is also noteworthy for its lack of moralism and sentimentalism that was so en vogue during the Victorian era. But does the absence of an obvious moral mean the story has no meaning? And what is the draw to Wonderland, that dreamy realm of easily outraged creatures where madness is the ruling authority? What about that druggie caterpillar?

If any of these questions have ever occurred to you in regards to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, here's some sage advice from the King of Hearts, "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop."^{*}

^{*} *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-glass*, ed. John Tenniel, and Philip Gardner (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 121.

The World Around

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was published in 1865, a prosperous time for England when Queen Victoria ruled. Across the sea, America was finishing up the Civil War. It was around this time that new concepts of childhood were being developed and depicted in children's literature.

Much of the literature being produced during the Victorian era for children and adults was marked by sentimentalism. This idea, introduced by the philosopher Rousseau and reinforced by the Romantic movement, held that children and nature are inherently pure and uncorrupted, untouched by sin and evil. Many authors of the time, such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, Charles Kingsley (the author of *The Water-Babies*), and Lewis Carroll, saw children as innately innocent and near divine, so the stories and poems they wrote were full of children saying and thinking innocent and near-divine things.

But this naive sentimentality did not last. Six years prior to the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Charles Darwin presented his theory of evolution in *The Origin of the Species*, in which he claimed that life is simply the result of random, blind forces guided only by the survival of the fittest. His theory, along with other new theories on geology and the age of the earth, rocked the European world, which found itself in a "crisis of faith." With such saccharine and false views of people and nature as the Romantic movement fostered, it is not surprising that the era gave way to cynicism that darkened into atheism. The poet Matthew Arnold depicts this change in attitude in his 1867 poem *Dover Beach*:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.*

About the Author

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, popularly known by his pen name, Lewis Carroll, was a starchy Oxford don. He had a stammer and was once described as having a gait “as if he had swallowed a poker.”† He was officious, the sort of man who would rebuke someone for laying an open book face downward.‡ He had no tolerance for jokes made of religious subjects, and held deep convictions about what children should and should not laugh at. He once canceled his support of a girls’ school-run newspaper, *Jabberwock*, whose name paid tribute to his own work, after reading a limerick in one copy which made fun of a Unitarian minister.§ Many have asked how this kind of man could be the creator of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a children’s story full of nonsense and a seeming disregard for reason, logic, and mathematics.

Born in 1832 to the Reverend Charles Dodgson and Frances Jane Lutwidge, Charles was the third born and eldest son of eleven children. His childhood was happy and uneventful. He excelled in school, particularly in the areas of mathematics and prose and verse. He eventually studied at Westminster, and then Oxford where he would later lecture in mathematics and receive holy orders at Christ Church (a position that required celibacy).

Dodgson was a gadgeteer, a lover of logic games, and a successful photographer, specializing in nude portraits of children (not just nude newborns, as seen today). Although these kinds of photos were

* Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold,” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach> (accessed April 29, 2019).

† Derek Hudson, *Lewis Carroll: An Illustrated Biography* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1977), 128.

‡ Morton N. Cohen, *Lewis Carroll: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 291.

§ Cohen, 305.

Wonderland. After many riddles and not one cup of tea, Alice leaves the party only to cross paths with an ugly Duchess who collects morals like stamps, and then the Queen of Hearts herself, an irate individual who threatens to lop off the heads of all who question her. In such a place, Alice is understandably bewildered and unsure of what to think about herself and all the “mad” folk around her.

When Alice is called as a witness in the trial over who stole the Queen of Hearts’ tarts, she comes to the conclusion, just as the kingdom of cards begins to assault her, that it is all nonsense. She wakes up and recounts the adventure to her sister, hoping to one day have the same dream again.

Worldview Analysis

“Poor, poor little Alice,” G.K. Chesterton once lamented. “She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others.” Chesterton was right to grieve. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a story full of whimsy and fun, has grown up into a serious scholarly work. The lessons taken from Wonderland by Saturnine academics are numerous and range from Freudianism to postmodernism to psychedelic drug trips.

But what is the Christian to make of the realm where two plus two equals five, babies transform into pigs, and playing cards exact inexact justice? For many, the jury is still out on this zany children’s tale. And no wonder, when the scholarly jury chosen to interpret it seems to be made up of Mad Hatters and March Hares themselves.

Granted, this is not a straight-forward story we’re dealing with. Consider the final scene. The bumbling King of Hearts, serving as judge in the trial over who stole the Queen’s tarts, attempts to interpret the most intriguing piece of evidence: an anonymously written poem featuring a dizzying trail of personal pronouns.

* “Lewis Carroll,” in *On Lying in Bed and Other Essays* (Calgary, Alberta: Alberto Manguel, 2000), 235. Quoted in the introduction to *The Annotated Alice*, xiii.

“If there’s no meaning in it,” says the King, “that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn’t try to find any. And yet, I don’t know,” he went on spreading out the verses on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; “I seem to see some meaning in them after all.”

The poem that the King is pouring over is actually a parody of a song that was popular during Lewis Carroll’s time, a song whose words, like many of the pop songs of our day, were catchy-sounding but lacked depth of meaning.*

When Alice is called to the stand as a witness in the Knave’s trial, she declares about the poem, “I don’t believe there’s an atom of meaning in it.”

But the King is a careful judge and a meticulous literary scholar. He gives the lines a (very) close read, freely associating the poem with his own situation. “‘We know it to be true’—that’s the jury, of course—‘if she should push the matter on’—that must be the Queen—‘what would become of you?’ What, indeed!”†

The King’s plight is a familiar one to readers of *Alice*. What does it *mean*? Admittedly the story is bizarre; a dream sequence of an upside down world. But if reading the above passage did not make you chortle, if you paused to reflect upon the philosophical implications of the poem, the King’s interpretation, and the courtroom scene, or scratched your head over the symbolism, then you missed the point.

To appreciate *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* there are a couple things to keep in mind: its worldview comes to the reader indirectly; it is not explicitly found through close readings of the narration and cannot be sifted from the character’s dialogue. The ultimate worldview of *Wonderland* is carried through the story’s form, nonsense, and this nonsense is offset by the heroine, Alice.

* *The Annotated Alice*, 122.

† *The Annotated Alice*, 123.

And the point? To laugh.

Part of enjoying *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is understanding the genre: This is a work of nonsense. Nonsense literature has arguably been around since Aristophanes, but the genre had a fresh moment during the Victorian Era with the arrival of Edward Lear's poems and the works of Lewis Carroll.[‡] The chief characteristics of this form are word play, puns, parodies, alliteration, and heavy-handed rhyme schemes.[§] Another big tell of this genre are words that are, literally, nonsense but which sound meaningful. An example of this can be seen in the words 'slithy' and 'mimsy,' words used in one of the most famous passages of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the "Jabberwocky" poem. The character Humpty Dumpty explains 'slithy' and 'lithe' as follows: "Well, 'slithy' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see it's like a portmanteau [a large suitcase]—there are two meanings packed up into one word."[¶] This packing together of word-parts have ever since been called "portmanteaus." The word *chortle*, which now has its own place in the Oxford English Dictionary, was coined by Lewis Carroll and is a cross between a snort and a chuckle. Not all portamnteaus are funny: *podcast* is a portmanteau of *iPod* and *broadcast*.

Whereas nonsense in literature prior to the Victorian era smacked of soft satire, during the 19th century it transformed into something more childish whose chief goal was to amuse.**

In his essay *A Defence of Nonsense*, G.K. Chesterton describes the distinction between satire and 19th century nonsense.

There is all the difference in the world between the instinct of satire, which, seeing in the Kaiser's moustaches something typi-

‡ G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*, second edition (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1902).

§ Celia Catlett Anderson and Marilyn Apseloff, *Nonsense Literature for Children: Aesop to Seuss* (Hamden, CT: Library Professional, 1989).

¶ *The Annotated Alice*, 215.

** See G.K. Chesterton, *The Defendant*.



I. DOWN THE RABBIT-HOLE

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book,” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”

So she was considering in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid) whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on,

Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very deep well.

Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves: here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. She took down a jar from one of the shelves as she passed; it was labelled "ORANGE MARMALADE," but to her disappointment it was empty; she did not like to drop the jar for fear of killing somebody underneath, so managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it.

"Well!" thought Alice to herself. "After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" (Which was very likely true.)

Down, down, down. Would the fall *never* come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down. I think—" (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the schoolroom,

and 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) “—yes, that’s about the right distance—but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I’ve got to?” (Alice had no idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but thought they were nice grand words to say.)

Presently she began again. “I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The Antipathies, I think—” (she was rather glad there *was* no one listening, this time, as it didn’t sound at all the right word) “—but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know. Please, Ma’am, is this New Zealand or Australia?” (and she tried to curtsy as she spoke—fancy *curtseying* as you’re falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?) “And what an ignorant little girl she’ll think me! No, it’ll never do to ask: perhaps I shall see it written up somewhere.”

Down, down, down. There was nothing else to do, so Alice soon began talking again. “Dinah’ll miss me very much to-night, I should think!” (Dinah was the cat.) “I hope they’ll remember her saucer of milk at tea-time. Dinah, my dear, I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I’m afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that’s very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, “Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?” and sometimes, “Do bats eat cats?” for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t much matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah, and saying to her very earnestly, “Now, Dinah, tell me the truth: did you ever eat a bat?” when suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over.

Alice was not a bit hurt, and she jumped up on to her feet in a moment: she looked up, but it was all dark overhead; before her was another long passage, and the White Rabbit was still in sight, hurrying down it. There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned a corner, "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!" She was close behind it when she turned the corner, but the Rabbit was no longer to be seen: she found herself in a long, low hall, which was lit up by a row of lamps hanging from the roof.

There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out again.

Suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass; there was nothing on it but a tiny golden key, and Alice's first idea was that this might belong to one of the doors of the hall; but, alas! either the locks were too large, or the key was too small, but at any rate it would not open any of them. However, on the second time round, she came upon a low curtain she had not noticed before, and behind it was a little door about fifteen inches high: she tried the little golden key in the lock, and to her great delight it fitted!

Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole: she knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; "And even if my head would go through," thought poor Alice, "it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin." For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.

There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table, half hoping she might find another key on it, or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes: this time she found a little bottle on it (“which certainly was not here before,” said Alice,) and tied round the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words “DRINK ME” beautifully printed on it in large letters.

It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. “No, I’ll look first,” she said, “and see whether it’s marked ‘poison’ or not;” for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked “poison,” it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

However, this bottle was *not* marked “poison,” so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, coffee, and hot buttered toast,) she very soon finished it off.

“What a curious feeling!” said Alice. “I must be shutting up like a telescope.”

* * *

And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through that little door into that lovely garden. First, however, she waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this: “for it might end, you know,” said Alice to herself, “in my going out altogether, like a candle.

I wonder what I should be like then?" And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.

After a while, finding that nothing more happened, she decided on going into the garden at once; but, alas for poor Alice! when she got to the door, she found she had forgotten the little golden key, and when she went back to the table for it, she found she could not possibly reach it: she could see it quite plainly through the glass, and she tried her best to climb up one of the legs of the table, but it was too slippery; and when she had tired herself out with trying, the poor little thing sat down and cried.

"Come, there's no use in crying like that!" said Alice to herself, rather sharply. "I advise you to leave off this minute!" She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people. "But it's no use now," thought poor Alice, "to pretend to be two people! Why there's hardly enough of me left to make *one* respectable person!"

Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake, on which the words "EAT ME" were beautifully marked in currants. "Well, I'll eat it," said Alice, "and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!"

She ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself, "Which way? Which way?" holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing, and she was quite surprised to find that she remained the same size; to be sure, this is what generally happens when

one eats cake, but Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way.

So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake.



II. POOL OF TEARS

Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for a moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); “now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!” (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off). “Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears? I’m sure *I* shan’t be able! I shall be a great deal too far off to trouble myself about you: you must manage the best way you can—but I must be kind to them,” thought Alice, “or perhaps they won’t walk the way I want to go! Let me see: I’ll give them a new pair of boots every Christmas.”

And she went on planning to herself how she would manage it. “They must go by the carrier,” she thought; “and how funny it’ll seem, sending presents to one’s own feet! And how odd the directions will look!

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

Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!"

Just then her head struck against the roof of the hall: in fact she was now rather more than nine feet high, and she at once took up the little golden key and hurried off to the garden door.

Poor Alice! It was as much as she could do, lying down on one side, to look through into the garden with one eye; but to get through was more hopeless than ever: she sat down and began to cry again.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Alice, "a great girl like you" (she might well say this), "to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!" But she went on all the same, shedding gallons of tears, until there was a large pool all round her, about four inches deep and reaching half down the hall.

After a time she heard a little pattering of feet in the distance, and she hastily dried her eyes to see what was coming. It was the White Rabbit returning, splendidly dressed, with a pair of white kid gloves in one hand and a large fan in the other: he came trotting along in a great hurry, muttering to himself as he came, "Oh! the Duchess, the Duchess! Oh! won't she be savage if I've kept her waiting!" Alice felt so desperate that she was ready to ask help of any one; so, when the Rabbit came near her, she began, in a low, timid voice, "If you please, sir——" The Rabbit started violently, dropped the white kid gloves and the fan, and scurried away into the darkness as hard as he could go.

Alice took up the fan and gloves, and, as the hall was very hot, she kept fanning herself all the time she went on talking! "Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed during the night? Let me