

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND



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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."<sup>1</sup>

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1. *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.



## 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.”<sup>3</sup> He was officious, the sort of man who would rebuke someone for laying an open book face downward.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Many have asked how this kind of man could be the creator of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, a children’s

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

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

5. *Ibid.*, 305.





## SETTING, CHARACTERS, AND PLOT SUMMARY

- Setting: The sleeping mind of an upper-class Victorian English girl.
- Alice: The seven-year-old protagonist who follows the white rabbit and wonders who she is in the strange dreamland she finds herself in.
- The White Rabbit: The stressed-out mammal whom Alice follows into Wonderland.
- The Dodo: A bird with a large curved beak that cannot fly. Also, has been extinct since 1681. Instigator of the Caucus race and probably Carroll himself.<sup>18</sup>
- Puppy: The only creature in Wonderland who doesn't talk.

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18. According to Martin Gardner, "Carroll's dodo was intended as a caricature of himself—his stammer is said to have made him pronounce his name 'Dodo-Dodgson,'" in *The Annotated Alice*, 27.



## 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.

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19. “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.

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.

"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.<sup>20</sup>

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!"<sup>21</sup>

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20. *The Annotated Alice*, 122.

21. *Ibid*, 123.

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.

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.<sup>22</sup> The chief characteristics of this form are word play, puns, parodies, alliteration, and heavy-handed rhyme schemes.<sup>23</sup> Another big tell of

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

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