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Experiences of Childhood in the Victorian Cultural and Literary World of Carroll's Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*

Meher Nandrajog

Abstract

Regarded as a sequel to the 'children's fiction' novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is a bildungsroman that presents the adventures of its girl-child protagonist, Alice, in the fantasy world on the other side of her looking glass. Located in a Victorian cultural and literary context, the novel roots itself in the conflicts of the age to which it belongs, and simultaneously presents a parody of Victorian ways and values, thereby questioning the contradictions inherent in them. This essay historically contextualizes Carroll's novel in Victorian England, and examines Alice as a Victorian middle-class heroine equipped with Victorian values that she uses to confront the Looking Glass world of upturned logic and language. It also examines the way in which Carroll's book not only reflects the conventional prescriptions for the age and genre to which it belongs, but questions and negotiates with them as well. The essay thus looks at the novel as a function of its location in the Victorian cultural context through an examination of the qualitative aspects of children's literature available at the time, the literary representation of children in Victorian texts, and the conflicts with Victorian values as experienced by Alice in such a context. When analyzed through these frameworks, *Through the Looking Glass* presents itself as a text with satiric and subversive possibilities, which are hidden in its upturned language and logic of 'nonsense'. This is what the essay examines.

Keywords: Victorian childhood, Children's Literature, nonsense, satire, selfhood.

1. Introduction

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), classified as children's fiction, presents the adventures of its girl-child protagonist, Alice, in the fantasy world on the other side of her looking glass. Regarded as a sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it is a bildungsroman that maps the journey of Alice from 'white pawn' to 'queen' in her chess-game-quest in the Looking Glass world of upturned logic and language. Located in a Victorian cultural and literary context, the novel roots itself in the conflicts of the age to which it belongs, and simultaneously presents a parody of Victorian ways and values, thereby questioning the contradictions inherent in them. By historically contextualising the Alice books in Victorian England — a "troubled and troublesome" age (Bose, 2018, p. viii) of highly moralistic children's literature, Alice can be seen as a Victorian middle-class heroine equipped with Victorian values that she uses to confront "a world out of control by looking for rules and murmuring her lessons" (Auerbach,1973, p. 31).

However, the Alice books do not simply reflect the conventional prescriptions for the

age and genre to which they belong, but question and negotiate with them as well. Thus, the text stands, in this regard, in vivid contrast to the literature produced in England both for and about children in Carroll's time. This essay analyses Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* as a function of its location in the Victorian cultural context through an examination of the qualitative aspects of children's literature available at the time, the literary representation of children in Victorian texts, and the conflicts with Victorian values as experienced by Alice in such a context. When examined through these frameworks, *Through the Looking Glass* presents itself as a text with satiric and subversive possibilities.

1. Children's Literature in the Victorian Age

The rise of children's literature in England was a feature of the Victorian age that finally recognized the category of 'child' in an evolutionary stage as different from that of adult. Jan B. Gordon historically locates this prominence given to the figure of the child and the deployment of the child as metaphor in Victorian literature by referring to capitalist exploitation of child labour, foregrounding of family and inheritance, and post-Reformation association of the child with innocence. A difference in perception and understanding of children was thought, thus, to call for a literature of a separate kind that could be both entertaining and morally instructive in Victorian values and virtues. Didactic, moralistic literature that was "pallid" and "dull" then overtook the fantasy fairy-tale tradition of stories for children, which was discarded for having no educative purpose and only creating confusion by not separating fantasy from reality (Bose, 2018, p. xx).

The figure of the child was also employed in literature written for adults through tropes associated with the Victorian age in England. Narratives would feature a child protagonist, portrayed in adult terms, who quested onwards in a search for identity, and meaning in a chaotic world, and served as a repetition and reinforcement of values imposed on children by the adult world. Carroll's narratives operate within this context of literary representations of the child in Victorian literature and parallel this tradition by tracing commonalities with these tropes while also negotiating with them. Carroll's Alice then becomes, in Walter de la Mare's terms, both a "tribute… to Victorian childhood" (Bose, 2018, p. xviii), and a critique of it, and his Alice books challenge the standard tradition of "dull" lesson-imparting literature for children.

The child figure in Victorian literature, Nina Auerbach theorizes, would "swing back and forth between extremes of original innocence and original sin" (Auerbach, 1973, p. 44), for example, in the frameworks of Rousseau and Calvin. This follows from the Victorian ambiguity inherent in childhood as a period of innocence and imagination as opposed to a 'sinful' and ugly reality outside. Children in literature were thus given a role as the 'innocent', and particularly stressed upon was the idea of a pure, virtuous, (sexually) innocent girl/woman. These ideas of purity and virtue were especially significant, in so far as prescriptions for girls/young women were concerned.

Women characters in fiction were generally presented as flat and static, and as adhering to a fixed morality through the course of the novel. Alice, who goes on an exploration to a different world in which she negotiates her identity, then transgresses that Victorian morality for young women which would not have allowed for such mobility outside of the domestic sphere. This is, in fact, suggested in the way in which Alice walks away from the Looking Glass house, only to discover that the more she turns away from it, the closer she gets to its constrained space. If the "Idealisation and idolisation of young girl-child is a significant distillation of that very inclination of Victorian society to sweep unpalatable truths under a moralistic rug and pretend that to ignore reality is to arrest its onward march in time"

(Bose, 2018, p. xx), then Carroll uses the same trope of the innocent girl-child Alice to question the moral pretences of the Victorian society.

2. Conflict with Victorian Values in *Through the Looking Glass*

The novel is marked by the acknowledgement that the dream-child Alice will grow out of her innocence as part of a natural growth process, but there is ambivalence about whether this transformation is much desired. In this acknowledgement, however, space is given to Alice to grow into her identity and mature from 'pawn' to 'queen'. In fact, the ambivalence in the narrative that Alice represents is not simply the one attributed to the figure of the child by the Victorians, but the effect of that ambivalence on the child herself. Alice finds herself occupying the double position of both child and parent, and this doubleness and ambivalence of her position is used to turn social values, morals, and etiquette topsyturvy.

This paradox is presented by Carroll in the awareness that the world of adult reality is one which is grim, and yet it is not only an inevitability but the desire of Alice: "I wouldn't mind being a Pawn… though of course I should like to be a Queen, best" (p. 22). Alice thus shows the desire to grow and steer her own path as she does in "Wool and Water". The ambivalence of her desire for maturing is furthered expressed through the metaphor of the evanescent rushes. The visibly sexualised Alice, with her dripping hair, flushed cheeks, and heightened senses, reaches out for the "dream rushes" that she is so seduced by, only to find that "the prettiest are always farther" and that life disappoints with its "new-found treasures" that "melt away" (pp. 50-51).

The transportation of Alice to a different world in which she may grow into her identity also serves to highlight the safety of that fantasy world in its distance from the real world and the harshness of growing up in it. It is only the sentimentality of a dream reality that can protect children from the harshness of the adult world. The foetal image of the snug and sleeping Alice that opens the book, indoors, and curled on an armchair encapsulates the adult desire for stillness and finding escape from the harsh truths of the industrial outside world. Given the context of the post-Darwinian moral and spiritual unmooring of the Victorians and the exploitative industrial order of the world that they inhabited, the literature of the time reflected a bleak and chaotic world which only exploited and alienated, and in which family bonds were completely broken. The orphan child, or the child unmoored from the secure family setting and traversing alone though the city, was a figure central to Victorian novels, through whom the exploitative effects of development in Victorian England were traced, for example, in Dickens' novels. Such tropes may also be seen as paralleled in Alice's journey alone through the chessboard of the Looking Glass world as a satirised representation of the social conditions of the time.

3.1 The Victorian World of Mechanization and Power

Alice encounters the bleak world of mechanization and industrialization on her railway journey when she is confronted by a chorus of voices echoing that "time is worth a thousand pounds…smoke… is worth a thousand pounds… language is worth a thousand pounds" (pp. 50-51). The dehumanization of the chorus that she encounters as mere strangers on a train where she cannot even distinguish one from the other also points to the disconnect that the Victorians in early capitalist England feel with each other, and with themselves. The play with space and time in the novel then serves the purpose of pointing at this disorientation with the dizzying pace of life that Victorians feel and at their desperate need to achieve some

stasis, and Alice is made aware of this when she experiences that "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place" (p. 23).

Alice also faces figures of power and authority such as the Red Queen, who throw in her direction, directives and instructions that she can hardly make sense of. She encounters in her meeting with Tweedledee and Tweedledum, serious crimes such that of fratricide, and sees in the episode of the lion and the unicorn major political conflicts such as war (it is, perhaps, significant that in John Tenniel's illustration of this conflict, the unicorn is made to look like Disraeli, while the lion resembles Gladstone, both of who served as British Prime Ministers and were each other's parliamentary rivals). The novel thus, in a 'sedate' and satirical way, addresses grave issues of the social consequences of mechanization, wars and power struggles, exploitation and criminality, and the contradictions and double-facedness of human interaction (and also that of the age). Alice, who is alone and away from the guidance of her family, then moves forward as a pawn across the chessboard towards the queenship that she has been told she must achieve without any idea or control as to how or why, and must, in the process, discover her identity and find meaning in her actions. Thus, in this way, the displacement of Alice from the real world and entry into the fantasy world is a voyage to self-discovery in which she must counter the imposition of the values of the adult Victorian world. This trope of the child trying to survive in an alien world is a familiar one in Victorian literature.

3.2 The Victorian Imperialist Project

Colonial aspects of Victorian England are also highlighted in the novel in the imperiousness of Alice. The teleological, linear movement of Alice through the chess-board structure of the Looking Glass world may be read as a bid to attain selfhood, but also to rule, and set into a rational 'order' of logic, the 'chaotic', 'uncivilised' world of 'innocence' and metaphysical uncertainties of the Looking Glass. James Kincaid talks about the desires for power and control that Alice exhibits: she insists "I don't want to be anybody's prisoner… I want to be a Queen" (Carroll, 1871/2018, p. 72). Colonial undertones of the text are also highlighted in the conversation that takes place between Alice and the Red Queen in which she shows to Alice, from on top of a hill, the topography and extent of her country. Daniel Bivona thus calls Alice a "Child-Imperialist".

3. Sense, Nonsense, and Victorian Values

The conflicts and clashes of Victorian values that are reflected in the novel in the nonsensical episodes of Alice and the creatures of the Looking Glass world serve as a critique of the 'logic' and 'order' of the age that they represent. The book mocks at Victorian England through the subversion and inversion of language and logic and reasoning, which constitutes the literary nonsense that the text is famous for. The 'nonsense' of the Alice books that makes use of its satiric possibilities is not that which is devoid of sense, but clearly carefully structured and consciously constructed by the methodical mind of the logician that Dodgson was. The function that the nonsense in the novel fulfils is that it illuminates 'sense' and "explore[s] the limitations and potentialities of language and logic" (Matthews, 1970, p. 108) that was considered to be 'sensible'. 'Sense' and 'nonsense' are both theorizations that are relative to particular cultures. With Victorian ideals as the cultural backdrop for the Alice texts, the nonsense in them satirizes a societal order of "Victorian practicality and industry" (Matthews, 1970, p. 109), of which Alice is made the embodiment. The parodic tendencies of nonsense become a literary tool employed in writing to critique the norm or standard against which the 'absurd' is measured. In this book, it is Alice who serves as the English norm that gives the many 'bizarre' episodes that take place in the Looking Glass world their satiric implications.

The nonsense in the Alice books is premised on linguistic confusion or logical incoherence, and its satire is directed at the class-based social constraints that inscribed individuals within Victorian society: "The Victorian age, dominated by a status-seeking middle class rather than a pace-setting aristocracy, was the great age of the etiquette book...children were specially subjected to regimentation" (Matthews, 1970, p. 110). The episodes of Alice in the text highlight the arbitrariness of such etiquette, the paradoxical elements that it contains, and the constraints that it imposes on people.

Social custom is thus rendered meaningless in these encounters as seen in, for example, Alice's problem of protocol in her first meeting with Tweedledee and Tweedledum during which she shakes both their hands simultaneously so as to not accidentally offend with a decision that would have been most random, and therefore not at all consciously loaded with malice or meaning. Alice, who is schooled into 'polite behaviour' and 'good manners' comes to realise the mindlessness of her habits that are apparently without meaning so that she is forced to find the meaning in her actions. This realization serves as a critique of social habits and pre-given knowledge that she would regard as natural or true. Thus,

> not only is Alice frequently placed in the dilemma of having to find an objective justification for her conduct — a rather uncomfortably Sartrean plight, particularly for a Victorian heroine — she often suffers the consequences of blind adherence to what, in Victorian society, would be good manners. (Matthews, 1970, p. 116)

She takes the biscuit that she is offered by the Red Queen to quench her thirst because she has been taught to be civil and cannot, therefore, refuse it despite the obvious discomfort it will cause to an already vexed Alice. She meets with a similarly exasperating predicament when she cannot eat the mutton and the pudding that she has been introduced to by the Queen to avoid impoliteness on her part. Thus, in this way, the novel exposes the arbitrariness of etiquette that Victorian children, especially young Victorian girls, were schooled into.

4. Self-Image, Self-Exploration, and Self-Identity

Alice's movement in *Wonderland* is 'random', in that it is not bound by set rules as it is in the more deterministic chessboard world through the looking glass that is based on its own mathematical (reverse) logic. This deterministic pattern of the Looking Glass world in which she sets out on her quest marks Alice's greater quest for the identity and selfhood that she seeks. Psychoanalytic approaches have examined the logic of the chessboard game as implicated in the movement and actions of Alice in the Looking Glass world, which are marked by a newer self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that *Wonderland* Alice did not have.

Alice also faces the possibility of a loss of her identity when she enters the wood in which one cannot remember one's self. Her encounter with the fawn, and their walk through the wood in which they both forget their identities, proves critical for Alice. When the fawn remembers who he is, he runs away, leaving Alice in tears. She then examines the question of her identity that marks the beginning of her self-reflexivity, wisdom, and self-knowledge. Such questions pervade the novel. Alice is faced with a similar plight when she questions whether she is the one who is dreaming, or if she is only a part of the Red King's dream. She hopes that, "… It's *my* dream, and not the Red King's! I don't like belonging to another person's dream" (p. 71). Alice is, however, determined to move forward, for "I certainly won't go *back*" (p. 31). The awareness of her developing self is shown also in her question to the White King about the fight for power between the lion and unicorn: "And does — the one

— that wins — get the crown?" (p. 66).

Alice's encounters with the whimsicality and inverted nature of the Looking Glass world and its creatures make her question her own self through that "process of self-alienation that comes from knowing oneself through an external image" (Coats, 2004, p.86). In fact, the image of the looking glass is also connected with the Lacanian idea of self-image and self-exploration. Jenjijoy La Belle sees Alice's looking glass as not only a tool for self-exploration but also as a social instrument that formulates the self, according to cultural norms. The creatures who question her acquired knowledge lead to introspection and questioning of the 'self' that derives from social mores of the Victorian adult world, and this enables Alice's self-discovery in the contrasts that she makes between the Looking Glass creatures and herself.

5. The Arbitrariness of Language and Meaning

Alice is made also to think of the arbitrary nature of the language she uses in which words are assigned a meaning that she must simply accept as given. In the Looking Glass world, she figures that the signifier – signified logic is such that names must relate to the nature of the thing that they signify, while ordinary words can have whatever meaning the speaker may choose to give to them. Humpty Dumpty is, therefore, named so for his shape and the bread-and-butter-fly for its bodily composition, while Alice is left justifying why hers is not a "stupid name enough!" because "*Must* a name mean something?" (Carroll, 2018, p. 54).

The 'irrationality' and contrary logic of the Looking Glass world thus present a sharp critique of the 'rationality' of mind that Victorians prided themselves in. In her encounter with the intellectual know-it-all Humpty Dumpty, and the "good deal of poetry" that she is made to hear "that day" (p. 77), Alice is forced to deal with and make sense of the 'rational' language and logic of the society that she is used to. This nonsense of irrationality paints a satiric portrait of the Victorian society that Carroll inhabits.

6. Results and Discussion

The satirizing of Victorian social pretensions through nonsense, converse logic, and linguistic 'unconvention' is the way in which Carroll addresses the conflicts and contradictions of his age. The fantasy episodes and literary nonsense in *Through the Looking Glass* serve also as a sharp critique of the human pride in 'rationality' by illustrating a universal irrationality that pervades not only Victorian England, but everywhere. Characterized to be "satire *manqué*" by Charles Matthews (p. 119), the novel also highlights the narrowness in categorizing literature as 'either/or'— either that which is 'highly serious', or that which is 'nonsensical'. The Alice book may thus be read for its satirical motifs that present a critique of social etiquette, but the simple, child-like pleasure in the reading of its nonsense should not be overlooked in the process: "Something that critics overlook… Dodgson's preference for the society of little girls, children…" (Matthews, 1970, p. 119).

7. Conclusion

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll provides a gentle critique of the (lack of) logic in Victorian custom, etiquette, and forms and patterns of social behaviour that are reduced to mere social pretensions. Locating itself within the genre of 'Children's Fiction', the content and form of the narrative coalesce to not only represent but question dominant Victorian values and assumptions, thus opening subversive readings and interpretations. Carroll's writing has been examined through many critical perspectives over the years. Yet, G.K. Chesterton expressed, in 1932, his "dreadful fear" of Carroll having been exposed to so much critical analysis that the simple joy of reading him had been entirely lost: "Poor, poor, little

Alice! She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others… There will be lots and lots of examination papers, with questions…" (Bose, 2018, xi). The advice that seems, then, to be given is that any critical analysis of Carroll is to be balanced by the simple pleasure of reading it.

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Bio-note

Meher Nandrajog is a Student of Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University.

Email Id: meher27022001@gmail.com