The Book Quest

The History of the Book is interested in every aspect of a book's creation, conception, production, distribution, and survival, **except for textual and thematic analyses** for their own sake.

Locate your book in its time, culture, and geography. History of the Book scholars want to know how a book came to be, in what kind of a society, for what purpose or reason. Some books are interesting because of their author, or the mentality or philosophy that are revealed in the text, or the message they contain, or their purpose, or their printer-publisher, or the editing or censure imposed upon it by the state or the church, etc.

You must look at the **society**, and the **genre, or the tradition** into which it is born (macro view), and **inside the book** to see **what messages** are being sent, and **how** these are being sent (satire, pretense of authentic travel tale, etc.) (micro view). You are not expected to take apart the entire work, but to be familiar enough with the work to give examples from it.

Some questions to ponder
Who wrote it? In what circumstances?
How was this book created?
What inspired it?
In what circumstances (political, economic, religious, and cultural) was this book born?
How was published (and/or perhaps cropped, modified, etc. to suit the publisher's needs or the readers' expectations)?
Who helped it happen and who hindered it?
How was it received by the state, the church, the scholars, and the readership of its time?
Was it pirated? Forbidden? Translated? Partially destroyed? Lost? Re-discovered?
How was it distributed?
Was it influential in its own time? Why?
How did it survive?
Did it start a genre or help define one?
What ideals, universals, or concepts does it contain that make it relevant over a long period of time?

This essay will be the result of your research and proposal (and the comments I made about them) at the end of our first term. Your quest is to explain what makes your book special in the context of the history of the book.

To give clarity and authority to your points, you will use both **primary** and **secondary quotes**. Look here for more on quoting.

Your essay will be 8-10 pages (not including the bibliography), in MLA format, and should be submitted in **both electronic form and paper copy.**

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a classic British fairy tale written in the mid-19th century and first published in 1865 by Alexander Macmillan. Recognized as the author of one of the most nonsensical pieces of fiction of the time, Carroll created a shift in book history that was arguably much needed for Victorian literature. *Wonderland* especially marked a pivotal moment in the development of the children's literature genre, namely in terms of child development and didacticism. Victorian values concerning the home, the child, and young girls were directly challenged by the underlying concepts that *Wonderland* proposed. I will argue that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* radically transformed the Victorian perception of the child, children's literature, and cultivated a cross-generational readership that continues today.

Book production in the Victorian Era was steadily increasing, as was the desire to author books. While some would write books as a main source of income, authors were often currently or previously employed in another field (Sutherland 349). Such was the case for Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (now known as Lewis Carroll), who was a twenty-four year old mathematics professor and clergyman at Oxford University. The circumstances under which *Wonderland* was published, then, include Carroll's position at Oxford and his relationships with his religious and academic superiors, which included Henry George Liddell, Dean of Christ Church College at Oxford. He was also the father of Alice Liddell, Carroll's initial inspiration for *Wonderland*.

During this particular period in Carroll's life, in the 1850s, a liberal movement in Europe was well underway, and unlike Carroll, Dean Liddell supported those reformations. In academia, such changes would introduce a system "by which merit was measured in terms of academic achievement alone" (Day 407). Carroll, along with his religious superior, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, was a conservative Christian who was strongly against this liberal

movement (Day 407). Thus, some of Carroll's observations of Bishop Wilberforce, Dean Liddell, and others at Oxford made their way into *Wonderland* to parody their opposing views.

Carroll's Christianity also put him at odds with the burgeoning theory of evolution that accompanied the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859. The following year, a debate on creationism versus evolution occurred at Oxford primarily between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley (Day 407). This social and historical context serves as the foundation on which *Wonderland* was born.

While the story of "the golden afternoon" with Carroll and the Liddell girls in 1863 is familiar to most, the technical details of *Wonderland*'s conception are detailed at length in Carroll's own diaries (currently owned by the British Library). In *The Original Alice: From Manuscript to Wonderland,* Sally Brown used those diaries to properly document the publication of the book, including the details of Carroll's involvement. After his initial oration of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* for the young Liddell girls, Carroll was urged by ten-year-old Alice Liddell herself to commit the story to paper. He eventually sent a copy to Alice in 1864, and after that, a copy to George MacDonald, a children's novelist, who subsequently encouraged Carroll to publish the book (Brown 31). It is unclear what exactly may have prompted Carroll to seek out London publisher Alexander Macmillan, besides recommendations and knowledge of his previous work (including Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*). However, Carroll was aware of how quickly and effectively Macmillan could work, and Macmillan's connections in academia and the art world were also of great interest to him (Jaque and Giddens 16).

The production of *Wonderland* was generally without fault. Carroll insisted on paying the full amount to print the manuscript and Macmillan would receive a portion of the profits of the book for production and distribution (Brown 38). What occasionally slowed the

process were Carroll's meticulous demands for producing a quality book – specifically, for designing a book that children would want to read. "Carroll had a strong concern for appealing to a child reader, in a publishing context that was then, as now, dominated by adults buying the books that they saw as fit for children." (Jaque and Giddens 16). Carroll also had to go about replacing the rough illustrations he had crafted for Alice's personal copy of the book with better drawings by a professional artist. Since Carroll was familiar with the work of renowned *Punch* cartoonist John Tenniel, in particular "his ability to render human-like animals and caricatures" (Jaque and Giddens 11), Carroll commissioned him to contribute 42 illustrations to the book.

The only major delay came after the first edition was printed. Along with the commercial print-run of 2000 copies (to be printed at Oxford and distributed by Macmillan), Carroll also wanted 50 advance copies to give to friends and family (including the Liddells), to be distributed himself in July of 1865 (Jaque and Giddens 17). Unfortunately, after reviewing a sample copy of the book, Tenniel was appalled by the quality of his illustrations, and Carroll also noted that the overall print quality of the book was lacking (Jaque and Giddens 18). So, the 2000 commercial copies remained unpublished, especially since "Carroll's first concern was to have Wonderland reprinted at a higher quality" (Jaque and Giddens 18). For this endeavour, Macmillan recommended London printer Richard Clay, assuring Carroll and Tenniel that the illustrations and print quality would be improved. This second edition of 2000 copies was published in November of 1865 (Jaque and Giddens 19). Since the initial 2000 copies with the undesirable illustrations were never distributed, Macmillan prepared them for distribution in the United States by American publisher D. Appleton and Company in May of 1866 (Jaque and Giddens 18). This third edition consisted of Tenniel's original poor quality illustrations with an Appleton title page. This is why there are three "first" editions of the book on record (Jaque and Giddens 19).

Critics met *Wonderland* with great positivity and that good fortune carried over into book sales during the first few years of its publication. It helped that Carroll was eager to keep working on the book and print new editions, as well as to have it available in several translations for his growing readership in other European countries (Brown 51). Positive reviews from critics spoke mostly of the fairy tale's eccentricity and clever use of language; others praised Tenniel for his artwork. Of the few negative reviews, critics mainly focused on the story itself and its potential for confusion among young readers. In fact, as more adults became enthralled with its wordplay and veiled political discourse, the more critics worried, like those in *The Athenaeum*: "'We fancy that any child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, overwrought story'" (Jaque and Giddens 35). However, even more influential in its time was the praise *Wonderland* received for its apparent adherence to anti-didacticism (Jaque and Giddens 61), which was a quite radical stance to take, seeing as all children's literature up to that point had been meant for childhood instruction and the promotion of family roles in the home.

The role of children's literature in the Victorian Era involved the practice of didacticism and instruction. From the late 18th century well into the 1860s, children's literature faced much debate in how exactly to challenge imagination as a tool for teaching children (Reichertz 21). Religious, moral, and informational texts were at the forefront of didactic children's literature; in their nature, all contained some form of cautionary tale warning children to avoid bad behaviour and to do what is expected of them. Of the three, Victorian literature widely employed informational didacticism and it was prevalent in all of the official texts for children (Reichertz 21). This made it possible for this form of literature to challenge "the rise and consolidation of imaginative literature and, especially, of fantasy" (Reichertz 22). So, it was no wonder that *Wonderland* stood out in 1860s England, and challenged didacticism in a subversive way. In a discussion of Victorian earnestness, Donald

Rackin names other writers of the time, including Thackeray, Lear, Meredith, Shaw, and others "who showed their age how to laugh at itself" (12). Carroll conclusively joined these ranks. Many other book historians interested in children's literature of the Victorian Era have come to the conclusion that children's literature went through a fundamental transformation after the publication of *Wonderland*.

While the readers of *Wonderland* initially found the didacticism or the lack of a moral centre to be refreshing, some critics expressed concern over its lack of morality (Jaque and Giddens 74). Simply put, it was unheard of for a book to contain no consequences for bad behaviour and no underlying message of Victorian values. Carroll was conflicted; his Christian morals and the obvious success of the book as a fantasy were at odds. So, in a desperate effort to broaden his readership, he was prompted by Macmillan to pen another rendition of *Wonderland* that had a clearer sense of rationality (Jaque and Giddens 61). *The Nursery Alice* was published in 1890 with more illustrations and added material, rendering the book physically larger, but shorter in length. This edition was naturally effective with young readers, but the adults and critics who had become so fond of the original text found the newly placed morality to be discordant with the fantastical underpinnings of the story (Jaque and Giddens 75). So much of the book's intellectual basis can be found in its satire and parody – features that are generally aimed at a demographic that can understand them.

In the years during and following *Wonderland*'s fame, many comparisons have been made between Carroll's fairy tale and what Gerald Mulderig refers to as the "staid, serious, didactic world of other mid-Victorian children's books" (320). Mulderig pointedly agrees with Donald Rackin's suggestion that *Wonderland* "not only departs from, but actually satirizes, the conventional didacticism of so much nineteenth-century literature for children" (320). Rackin provides an example of this, which appears on the very first page of *Wonderland*: "'and what is the use of a book', thought Alice, 'without pictures or

conversations?'" (Carroll 1). Rackin points out that many Victorian children would have felt this way about books; entertainment or leisure were not yet among the many important reasons to read books (21). Still, the children who read *Wonderland* could rest assured that Alice was not a heroine who would teach them how to be moral and good – they could relate to her curiosity and her candour, and her willingness to flout the rules. Alice as a child heroine was as much a tool for the subversion of didacticism, as was the tale itself.

Alice was a new role model for young children – not because she was a traditionally good Victorian child, but because she was a true and honest child acting on whims and impulses. Examples of this come in the form of Alice's interactions with the inhabitants of Wonderland – she demands respect from all of them, even though she often feels no need to be respectful to them. At the Mad Tea Party, Alice is promptly turned away, but she defiantly responds, "There's plenty of room!" (Carroll 69) and takes a seat without hesitation. Alice is clearly keen to get whatever she wants, or simply take it if necessary. In contrast, Alice's behaviour is quite a deviation from her strait-laced Victorian contemporaries, who are essentially "thoughtful, prudent" and "self-sacrificing" (Mulderig 323).

However, Carroll must have realized that this formula for the young female heroine could not accurately portray a child's personal interests, ambitions, and convictions – at least, those that are not thrust upon her by those responsible for her Victorian upbringing. So, Alice certainly stands out in Victorian children's literature as "the antithesis of everything we should expect of the central character in a traditional Victorian girls' story" (Mulderig 323). Also, in terms of diverging from the traditional didactic narratives, the aforementioned concept of punishment for bad behaviour is also nonexistent in *Wonderland*. While Alice was not the first young heroine of her time to behave immorally, she was certainly the first to do so and not be explicitly punished (Mulderig 324).

Death, of course, typically served as a consequence for children behaving badly in traditional cautionary tales, though it did diminish in literature with the onset of the Victorian Era (Mulderig 326). In a satirical portrayal of this punishment, Alice routinely mocks any and all threats of punishment by death (of which there are more than actual deaths) (Mulderig 326). The Queen of Hearts threatens to administer Alice's own beheading, but Alice immediately cuts her off: "'Nonsense!' said Alice very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent" (Carroll 84). The Queen continues to demand wrongdoers to suffer beheadings that are never actually carried out. In comparison to the worlds introduced in other Victorian children's books, "Wonderland seems a world of striking moral laxity" (Mulderig 325).

The portrayal of Alice is central in many of the themes and concepts that make *Wonderland* still relevant today. The drastic and fundamental changes children in literature have undergone prove true; over time societies have become much more open to the idea of trusting and even relying on the strengths of children in and out of books. Providing such a voice for children—like the strong-willed voice of Alice—gradually transformed the children's literature genre into one that now portrays children as people. However, the child is not the only archetype who has experienced an unequal portrayal in the history of the book – the girl has also experienced this same fate. Alice's strong will made her a model of confidence and adventure amongst young girls, and this continues today. In a recent observation of her class titled "Unruly Women through the Ages," Megan S. Lloyd, a Welsh English professor, noted that "Alice's direct, candid approach to life is refreshing and something the young women in my class can relate to" (8).

As Alice ventures through the land with which she is not familiar, she travels about as if she has all the right in the world to be there. As previously mentioned, when Alice happens upon the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse at their boys' club tea party, she is promptly told "'No room! No room!'" (Carroll 69) but she takes a seat anyway. This might

be seen as impolite, especially coming from a young girl – but should Alice's autonomy be seen as a flaw? The "strong woman" trope is greatly debated in today's society, in literature and film as much as in reality. Make the woman too strong and she becomes unfeeling and cold; make her not strong enough and she is weak and emotional – at least, that is a common belief. Alice, evidently, proves that a woman can indeed be strong, cold, and emotional all at once. Alice is brash, impetuous, and candid, but above all else, she is multi-faceted, like everyone else. After all, these are also the qualities that allow her to speak her mind, like to the March Hare: "'You should learn not to make personal remarks,' Alice said with some severity, 'it's very rude'" (Carroll 70).

Unfortunately, critics are still inclined to interpret women's "assertive actions as aggressive and transgressive" (Lloyd 9), and thus, society views such heroines as "unfeminine". Lloyd suggests that these traits are reclaimed as inherently feminine (and inherently human) in her definition of "unruly women" (8). *Wonderland* is an example of how such an injustice is still prevalent today; yet, Alice is an inspiration for the young girls who seek to combat that injustice. Of course, this portrayal of a young girl's "unfeminine" attributes had little to no effect on the Victorian society at the time of *Wonderland*'s publication. But Carroll's fairy tale opened doors that would lead to the eventual development of portraying girls as girls – not in the image of society, but in the image of an individual. Perpetuating this representation of a radically different kind of young heroine would prompt several more "Alices" to appear in the years to come.

Of the possible millions of *Wonderland* adaptations that have come about over the years, it is important to highlight those that have maintained the tale as an instant and enduring classic. Carroll supervised the publication of several early editions, including his authoring of *The Nursery Alice*. In fact, illustrated children's books make up a large portion of 19th and 20th century literary adaptations (Jaque and Giddens 172). *Wonderland* was

eventually adapted for the stage, film and television, and even video games – but there is more to be said about the ways in which *Wonderland* was adapted and the motivation for doing so (more than the media used). Into the 20th century, it became clear to book historians and literary critics that the survival of Alice was heavily connected to authors' devotion to "encoding Alice with new meanings whilst simultaneously working to decode the associations of potential old ones". So while the fairy tale survives through many adaptations, the adaptations also serve as a collective search for meaning in the original book (Jaque and Giddens 227). This ongoing quest allows the original *Wonderland* to survive a century and a half after its original publication.

Of course, the form in which the story survives is often altered, sometimes beyond recognition. The breadth of these variations resides in "a conceptual framework that includes larger tropes of dreaming, fantasy, drug-taking, childhood fear, or heroic belligerence" (Jaque and Giddens 201). However, this begs the question: Is there a divide between the adaptations that stay true to the original and those that diverge from it? Jaque and Giddens suggest that "fidelity to the original is not a concern for most recent adapters" (201), so the motivation to adapt the story becomes not a matter of retelling it, but instead of reinventing a new Alice and a new Wonderland. These variations allow *Wonderland* to repeatedly leave its mark, altered only to suit the climate of society, politics, philosophy, and values of any given period of time.

Intentionally or not, Carroll created a children's book character whose wilfulness, precociousness, and sense of adventure made her an essential historical character. This image of the child as young and curious, with purpose and ambition of her own, distinctly changed how children were viewed in and out of literature. All the while, Carroll had published *Wonderland* during a time of devout Christian values and morals in Victorian England. In a manner of speaking, Carroll "helped to rid fiction of its heavy load of Victorian moral

baggage" (Polhemus 584), particularly in the children's literature genre. Older members of Victorian society had to live with children's literature becoming a source of wonder, fantasy, and most important to Carroll, a celebration of juvenility. Such a celebration gave parents and grandparents the opportunity to share the love of reading with the younger generations. This opened up new possibilities for children in literature, and through to the 20th century, children's authors began to give children their own perspectives, which were fresh and simple in their approaches to problem solving – not to be adverse to adults, but perhaps to be freer. The Alice who "decenters, de-constructs, and de-familiarizes the Victorian universe" (Polhemus 579) is still celebrated today as a model for children and adults alike.

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