

We're All Mad Ignorant Here:
How Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Satirizes Victorian Era Authority
Figures

What does one do when one finds themselves living in a society run by self-righteous, single-minded, baselessly authoritative adults? One writes a satire. The Victorian Era was one known for its strictly enforced, rigid list of rules and moral codes. The questioning of these standards was, of course, condemned and often not even considered. Lewis Carroll, however, took notice of the inherent flaws that will always be found within structures that are designed to be flawless. While the roundabout conversations and confusing dialogue in the chapters of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* may come off as nonsensical, so, Carroll might argue, would the Victorian society and its members. A reverend and a father, Carroll was concerned with the narrow-minded nature of Victorian educational and social structures. Through use of allegory and nonsense, Carroll crafts a novel that brings to light the absurdity, or danger, of idealizations that Victorian society had regarding education, politics, and morality.

Children will inherently look to adults for answers. Adults are often seen as wise, complete, or all-knowing. Carroll understood this, and it could be said that he also understood that during the Victorian Era adults, too, tended to see themselves as all-knowing, wise, or put-together, and he saw the dangers that these ideals could bring about. Throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, most of the conversations held by the inhabitants of Wonderland make little to no sense at all. However, all of the characters speak with grand confidence, regardless of the content of their dialogue. The Hatter, for example, greets Alice with a riddle that he knows he doesn't have the answer to. He also replies to her in phrases that don't seem to fit the conversation, which confuses Alice greatly. However, as a child, she assumes that it is not the Hatter who isn't making sense, but *her* who is unable to understand: "Alice felt dreadfully

puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet, it was certainly English" (62). These encounters represent the flaws of a society wherein children were seen rather than heard, and treated with impatience rather than encouragement to foster questions or creativity. This is not the only instance where Alice feels upset with herself for being unable to understand the nonsense spoken by adult characters. The adult characters, however, never acknowledge that they aren't making sense—rather, they speak confidently, like when Alice asks the answer to his riddle and the Hatter simply says, "I haven't the slightest idea" (63). Carroll is pointing out the unfairness imposed upon children of the time—they were seen as inferior, and adults were seen as smarter and superior, which is certainly not always the case.

Chapters nine and ten of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* entitled "The Mock Turtle's Story" and "The Lobster-Quadrille" bring these concerns to light in terms of education systems. In these chapters, Alice is introduced to a Mock Turtle and a Gryphon who, through anthropomorphism, can represent real-life educators of the time. In chapter nine, the Mock Turtle explains to Alice that he "went to school in the sea" where he learned "Reeling and Writing...Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision" (84, 86). The exaggerated absurdity of these lesson titles makes it evident that Carroll is satirizing some of the lessons taught in schools at the time, or instructors' lack of proper education. The Mock Turtle also went to school underwater, which could be another metaphor for an illegitimate, sub-par, or sunken form of learning.

The Mock Turtle continues his story, and tells of a turtle called Tortoise, which confuses Alice. When she asks about it, the Mock Turtle replies "angrily," and tells her "'Really you are very dull!'" to which the Gryphon adds, "'You ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking such a simple question,'" (84). Later, the Mock Turtle confuses the word "purpose" for "porpoise," and

when Alice attempts to correct him, he snaps at her and says, “I mean what I say” (92). Though he has clearly made an error, he makes Alice feel that it is she who is wrong. These instances are commentary from Carroll regarding educators and their unwillingness to accept questions or challenges from children. Alice is clearly afraid both to be wrong and ask questions, which is a counterproductive way to make children feel about their education. She feels “dreadfully puzzled” throughout their interactions, and when pressed to recite a verse, Carroll writes “Alice did not dare disobey, though she felt very sure it would all come wrong...” (94). Later in the chapter, after more demands from the Mock Turtle and Gryphon, Alice thinks, “How the creatures order one about, and make one repeat lessons!” (93). It’s evident that she is reminded of her real-life school experiences, where Victorian educators relied on a system of memorization of facts, lessons, and various verses.

When Alice recites a verse that they wish to hear, the Mock Turtle exclaims, “What *is* the use of repeating all that stuff...if you don’t explain it as you go on?” (94). This is certainly a dig at educators of the Victorian era who placed value in forcing children to memorize, rather than to understand. In his piece entitled *Satire and Synthesis: Parody and Satire of Victorian Education in the Works of Lewis Carroll*, Cameron Sedlacek writes “Alice has not truly learned anything from her school lessons if she is unable to explain what she has memorized. This is not a flaw in Alice, however; it is a flaw with the entire educational system of Victorian England,” (Sedlacek, 100). The issues within the educational system are what Carroll is trying to bring to light through this parody, because, as Sedlacek acknowledges, “reform is precisely what many Victorian...institutions feared. They dreaded their loss of control over education” (79).

Not only are Victorian authority figures in education being satirized in this novel, but those who hold political power are as well. The first instance we see of Carroll using this text as

a political allegory is in one of Alice's first encounters with animals in Wonderland. A small crowd of various critters suggests having a "Caucus-race" (26). The "race" turns out to be a highly unorganized event, wherein there is no set course or starting line, and "...they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over" (26). However, when the end is arbitrarily decided, the Dodo declares that "'Everybody has won, and *all* must have prizes.'" (26). An actual caucus is a political meeting of significant importance. It's very clear in calling this debacle a "Caucus-race" that Carroll is pointing his finger at political figures of the time, and their possible lack of knowledge or order, and their subsequent demand for "prizes."

More political satire is seen in Wonderland's Queen and King characters. The Queen of Hearts is arguably the meanest, harshest character in Wonderland and, if read as a political allegory, one can easily cast her as a representation of the real-life Queen Victoria, who was known for her harsh ruling. In almost every scene that features the Queen, she is exasperatedly screaming and demanding that someone be beheaded. No one ever actually gets beheaded, so this shows that the Queen is implementing threats and scare tactics as a way to get her subjects to behave in the way that she wishes. She grossly exploits her subjects in the chapter titled The Queen's Croquet-Ground. The croquet game pieces are all living beings; "the croquet balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet, to make the arches" (73). In using live people as part of her own game for entertainment, she demonstrates an abuse of power and a lack of empathy or acknowledgement of them as people. Carroll could be arguing that the real Queen Victoria's actions reflected these sentiments. Closer to the end of the novel, the courtroom scene is one that further exploits the unjust politics of the King and Queen. In this scene, the King is the judge,

which is a conflict of interest and an abuse of power. To make matters worse, there are no standard rules being followed in this trial, which is made clear when, before any witnesses are heard, the King implores the jury to “Consider your verdict.” (98). The entire scene follows no set of order, and when the Hatter, as a witness, confuses his dates, “the jury eagerly wrote down all three dates on their slates, and then added them up, and reduced the answer to shillings and pence” (98). This is Carroll’s use of nonsense to make parody of the political systems in place during this time period.

Queen Victoria’s tyranny was carried out in a manner of harsh hyper-morality. Thus, the Victorian society in which Lewis Carroll lived was one in which strict rules were enforced that condemned expression of spirit or questions towards the ideals and practices put in place. Simply put, the Victorian society was one in which children were seen as inferior beings who should not question the world that so harshly treated them. Through allegory, anthropomorphism, and nonsense, Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to satirize this strict, narrow-minded society, perhaps in hopes to open eyes towards reform. In writing this, Carroll encourages the questioning of political and social structures, especially in their insistence that their way is the only way. As Sedlacek puts it, “As Carroll so frequently teaches his readers, there is no single answer; all are equally justifiable, and the issue[s] [are] strengthened by a synthesis of all possible reasons, rather than selecting which reason is the ‘right’ one” (83).

Works Cited

Carroll, Lewis, et al. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland ; and, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Sedlacek, Cameron D., "Satire and Synthesis: Parody and Satire of Victorian Education in the Works of Lewis Carroll" (2016). All Master's Theses. 348.
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