

VIOLENCE IN THE POEMS IN THE ALICE BOOKS AND LEWIS CARROLL'S INTENDED AUDIENCE

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Abstract

Through a close reading of some of the major poems in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass¹, this essay examines how the author subverts the Victorian educator's notion that lessons must always offer a moral code by which children should live. Though originally intended for a child audience, the Alice books appear to have messages for an adult audience as well. The poems, especially, highlight the violence perpetrated by adults that children must become aware of in order to survive as they grow older. In his own way, Carroll was offering a didactic text that adults as well as children could learn from, even today.

While reading *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as a child, I remember feeling frightened when I imagined myself in Alice's place. I felt unable to confront the weird creatures, human and animal, as calmly as Alice did. I was frightened by the way the adult human figures, in *Wonderland* in particular, behaved. But I was entranced by the stories and was unable to stop reading until I found out what eventually happened to Alice. Now, in trying to write a critical paper on the *Alice* books, I find myself wondering what exactly was going through Lewis Carroll's mind when he wrote these stories. For whom were the stories intended – the little girls who rode with him in the boat so many years ago and others like them, or for a more mature audience capable of handling the intensity of the violence that pervades the stories, and especially the poems that feature so prominently in the books? Did he have any morals to hand out in the manner of most Victorian literature, or was his only a path that offered a sanctuary away from the stifling world of lessons?

The story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* begins with the need to get away from boring books with no pictures or conversations. As she falls asleep and dreams, Alice is transported into a *Wonderland* that provides her inquisitive mind with opportunities to explore and question, often pretending to be two people, one sometimes questioning, the other answering; sometimes being, on the one hand, the scolding/admonishing adult and on the other, a child who has made a mistake. This duality in her personality reflects back on Carroll's own personality. Born Charles L. Dodgson, he chose to be known as Lewis Carroll when writing fiction, in order, it appears, to separate the logician and mathematician that he was by profession from the artist. Furthermore, as an adult, Carroll chose to write entertaining stories for child friends of his, the *Alice* books being his most well-known. But how far behind could Carroll actually leave his adult personality to be able to write a successful story for children? Not too far, it would appear.

¹ *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is cited as *Alice* in the essay while *Looking Glass* refers to the Norton Critical Edition of the text used. When references are made to the Barnes & Noble edition of *Through the Looking Glass*, the title is cited in full. The *Alice* books refer to both books in either edition.

In writing the *Alice* books, Carroll very successfully fused his adult personality with the child within him. Critics, however, argue that the books are more suited to adult readers than children in their departure from the traditional mode of literature considered suitable for Victorian children. According to Richard Kelly, for instance, who also quotes Gilbert Chesterton and Jan B. Gordon in this connection, the *Alice* books have been interpreted by different schools of thought including the psychoanalytical, logical-linguistic, aesthetic, existential, etc. As he notes, “Although the *Alice* books were originally intended for children – indeed, very specific ones – they have since been appropriated by adults” (73). Given the changes that were taking place in Victorian England triggered by things like Darwin’s scientific investigations, religious doubts and controversies, and the Industrial Revolution, Carroll’s works could not have remained free of the influences of his environment. Therefore, though writing explicitly for children, Carroll would naturally seem to incorporate messages for an adult audience.

In talking about the queens in *Through the Looking Glass* and Carroll’s treatment of them, Gillian Avery, in her article “Fairy Tales for Pleasure,” comments that “By treating the world of lessons and governesses with such playfulness, Lewis Carroll reduces it from the terrifying place it must sometimes have seemed to a manageable absurdity” (327). In so doing, Carroll denounces the “didacticism and cramming” advocated by Victorian educators. Indeed, Carroll’s parodies of the various didactic Victorian poems would seem to support this view. Alice constantly refers back to lessons learned in order to make sense of Wonderland, and of herself. Repetition of poems learned by rote offer sanity, but when they all come out wrong, Alice is left confused. If we consider Alice’s wrong poems from a Freudian perspective, we could say that the poems come out wrong because that is the way Alice feels about them in her unconscious mind. Because of the strictness of Victorian upbringing in general, children could not speak their minds (they were to be seen and not heard). Thus, it is only likely that they harbored many unspoken thoughts about their lessons, perhaps even making parodies of them in their minds, revealing them in their unconscious moments, like Alice. Also, by parodying commonly known poems of his day and investing them with messages far removed from the moralistic and didactic lessons they originally had, Carroll succeeded in creating not just humorous nonsense verse as surface readings reveal, but poetry that exhibited lessons in the ways of the world, a world that was violent and where children, or their innocent minds, were not safe.

In his parody of Isaac Watts’ “How Doth the Little Busy Bee,” Carroll invests the moral poem with a message of violence that exists in the Darwinian world. By putting the poem in the context of the dream world of Wonderland, Carroll may have attempted to disguise his real intentions and instead induce amusement in his child readers, but he succeeds in revealing a world where only the strongest and fittest survive. Judging from Alice’s “sensible” attitude towards the strange experience she is undergoing (she manages to get hold of a jar of marmalade as she falls and can feel disappointed when she finds it empty! She is able, too, to feel concerned about dropping the jar for fear of killing someone), Alice comes through as someone who attends her lessons and has been well taught in Victorian manners (she tries to curtsy even as she falls while imagining how she would address someone she may meet on the other side of the world). And yet, when she goes to repeat a very common verse, it comes out differently. To Alice, this is evidence that she has become someone else. While this sounds like a logical conclusion for a little girl in strange surroundings, it is also a reflection of her unconscious desires.

Alice’s mind appears to harbor predatory instincts. Falling down the rabbit-hole, a symbolic journey into her unconscious mind, Alice is able to voice her true feelings, albeit against her will, and much to her distress, because at this early stage in the journey she resists the confrontation with her inner self – she is still in touch with her conscious mind (by the time of her encounter with the caterpillar, she has lost that touch: she cannot answer his question as to who she is). Repeatedly, she

talks about some creature eating another: “Do cats eat bats? ... Do bats eat cats?” (*Alice* 9), her cat eating mice, the dog eating birds. It seems only natural then that Alice should unconsciously change the original “How Doth the Little Busy Bee” into a poem that speaks of the crocodile that sits with its jaws open, waiting for fish to swim in.

The parody, however, is not nonsense, because it, like the other “nonsense” poems, has alternate meanings inherent in the words that we fail to comprehend and therefore, identify it as nonsense. Elizabeth Sewell, in her famous *The Field of Nonsense* defines nonsense as

A collections of words or events which in their arrangement do not fit into some recognized system in a particular mind. ... The appearance of nonsense – a lack of conformity in the material in question may be due either to an absence of internal relations in the material or to the presence of a system of which the mind is unaware. ... These two possibilities may look as if they amount to much the same thing, since, for the conscious mind, a relationship system which is unperceived is equivalent to there being no system at all. There is a difference, however, and one that has practical results. If you assume an absence of relations, you can get no further; but if you are ready to postulate relations as yet unperceived in the particular material, something may happen (3).

In other words, Sewell suggests that one must assume there to be a point of reference for any statement in order to make sense out of what may otherwise seem “nonsense.” In accordance with this definition, “How Doth the Little Crocodile” emerges as a poem that falls into the system of Darwinian theory, and is therefore not nonsense. The poem describes a natural predator-prey relationship where the fittest survive. Also, the inversion of the original moralistic poem is a ridiculing of the Victorian idea of the lessons that should be taught to little children.

This ridicule of Victorian moralizing is reflected later in the portrait of the Duchess, who is able to find a moral in every sentence, and yet because of their illogicality, the morals heighten the effect of ridicule. Victorian children were subjected to memorizing edifying poems, so Carroll’s poems provided some welcome relief. However, the poem in question here is not altogether devoid of a lesson as Beverly L. Clark seems to think. She believes “he did satirize inflicting such poems on children to teach moral precepts, once again showing sympathy for the child’s point of view. ... Yet more than probing his society with satire, Carroll wanted to entertain” (19). Instead of the original advice of learning to be hardworking and industrious, Carroll pictures deception and preying. By changing a few words here and there, Carroll is able to convert a didactic/moralistic/religious poem into something quite the opposite and provide a lesson in caution in addition to his avowed aim to entertain.

Presumably, to the child reader, this altered poem can only communicate the strangeness of Alice’s situation. Use of words such as “cheerfully,” “grin,” “neatly,” “welcomes,” “gently smiling,” in the second stanza (*Alice* 16) could very well give the impression to an innocent mind that the crocodile’s intentions were friendly, which makes it all the more frightening when the child realizes the real intentions of the crocodile. It is a lesson in the ways of the world couched in deceptively simple and friendly words. Carroll, it appears, used his language with the same kind of deception employed by the crocodile: at the same time that it entertains young minds, the story of Alice also exposes a world of violence, domination, and death.

“The Mouse’s Tale” is a further expression of the mindless destruction and violence that threatens the world of the innocent and the defenseless. In the earlier version of “The Mouse’s Tale” in *Alice’s Adventures under Ground*, the original version of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll had a

different story to tell. The tale, as then presented, told of two external threats – the cat and the dog. However, the mice, living under the mat, were not killed on purpose, but by accident as the dog and cat hunted for a rat. But are the cat and dog guilty of “motiveless malignity”? They are killers, true, but they seem to be acting in their natural element as predators. They may have been looking for food, although this is not mentioned, but the use of certain phrases in the story implies distance, and therefore unreality (“So they say”) and disbelief (“Think of that!”) (*Alice* 25). The story begins with “We” but then changes into the third person – obviously, the mouse telling the story was not killed or he wouldn’t be telling the story! This has the effect of not only distancing the storyteller from the event, but also showing him up as slightly confused, and thus alleviating the underlying theme of death. Linda M. Shires believes, however, that this poem is more realistic than the revision, though she does not elaborate on why she thinks so, except perhaps that Carroll implies the “natural behavior of predators” as a possible cause for the behavior of the cat and dog.

In the revised version of the poem, death becomes more imminent (and not just because it is the final word in the poem). Fury, the dog, will prosecute the mouse that he met in the house for no better reason than that he has nothing to do. There is no history to their relationship nor any reason for a trial. Here indeed is a case of “motiveless malignity.” In the original, the entire poem is printed in characters of the same size and the shape of the poem strongly suggests a mouse with its tail swinging over the edge of perhaps a table or a hand as it sits telling its tale, thus once more diminishing the grotesqueness of the killing.

In the revision, however, the size of the characters decreases, with “death” being singled out and most reduced at the end. Shires explains that this, rather than lessen the intensity of the threat (as suggested by the reduction in size), actually makes it more threatening because “here Carroll foregrounds miniaturization as technique, and the technique holds that a reduction in scale does not reduce the meaning of the content. It is as if the metaphoric were being squeezed out at the expense of the metonymic, not quite producing the confusions of a poem that makes no sense, but producing a similar excess of signification and meaning” (277). This poem, like “How Doth the Little Crocodile,” is certainly not nonsense. I disagree with Shires’ view, however, that the original poem was more realistic and think that the revision actually conveys the threat of death more realistically than the original by, in Shires’ words, “producing a(n)...excess of signification and meaning.” That is, the change in the shape of the poem signifies death more poignantly than the original and gives meaning to the shape itself. To Shires, “In both cases, the poem is printed as if it were a tail – roughly in the funnel shape of a tornado – since Alice and the Mouse are engaged in yet another verbal misunderstanding” (277). True, both poems are printed in a tail-shaped manner, but the second version suggests the waves that the mouse makes in the air in its struggle to break loose as the dog holds it captive in its mouth and moves its head from side to side in *its* attempt to prevent the mouse from getting away. The tornado-shape suggested by Shires could actually be interpreted as the turmoil as it retells the story, rather than a reflection of a mere “verbal misunderstanding.” For the mouse, death had been very real and close, which would account for its irritation at what it thought was Alice’s inattention.

Another poem “Speak Roughly” parodies “Speak Gently,” which, again, is a didactic poem. The parody denies everything that a Victorian child may have been taught. Advice is given to “speak roughly” and to “beat” the baby, who, in turn, intends only “to annoy” by sneezing. Morals and lessons are certainly not appreciated in Wonderland, or by Carroll, for that matter, as they are constantly made fun of throughout the books. As Donald Rackin comments, “This parody, like the earlier ones uttered by Alice, implicitly controverts Alice’s previous, above-ground moral code. The Duchess, so fond of aphorisms..., here recommends what Alice’s world would call sheer cruelty” (51). Once again, in this

poem, Carroll emphasizes violence in the innocent world of the child. However, the child no longer remains a child within this episode. Just as the Duchess thrusting the baby into her arms forces Alice (the child) into the role of mother (the adult), the baby itself devolves into a pig. Change takes place in two completely opposite directions, but both changes emphasize the instability of childhood and, therefore, innocence. For Kelly, the poem

also embodies Carroll's hostility towards boys. ... Furthermore, Carroll seemed to accept the dual standard for the treatment of boys and girls during the Victorian period. While middle- and upper-class girls were protected and isolated from the harshness of the world, their brothers were removed from their parents at an early age and sent off to public school where physical punishment was a normal part of their discipline (55).

This would perhaps explain why Carroll models the poem *Jabberwocky* on a knightly quest with a boy hero who fights and kills the Jabberwock, and proves his manhood. But within the story of the poem is an emphasis on the need for violence to effect the transition from boyhood to manhood. The warning issued by the boy's father is, in effect, an encouragement to cast away the cloak of childish innocence and initiate himself into adulthood, where the ability to do violence is considered maturity.

Jabberwocky, more than any other poem in the *Alice* books, has been the object of much discussion. This is the first poem in *Through the Looking Glass* and is actually also the only poem in the *Alice* books to use "nonsense" words in the sense that the words have no known meaning or has meanings of "which the mind is unaware," as Sewell puts it. It is also a poem that appears not to have a moral lesson to upset, but rather tells a story. However, the issue of violence continues to pervade the setting of the poem – at the end of the poem, Alice understands that "somebody killed something" (*Looking Glass* 118). Later when she talks to Humpty Dumpty about the poem, he tries to make sense of the strange words that Alice encounters in the poem. By explaining the words in terms that Alice understands, Humpty Dumpty is essentially bringing logic and sense back into Alice's bewildering surroundings. On the other hand, Humpty Dumpty is like the learned critic who tries to make intelligent guesses at what an author may mean. However, it is obvious that Carroll is parodying the critic here in Humpty Dumpty. Alice is skeptical of the meanings that Humpty offers and accepts one meaning as doing just as well as another. By following his logic, or what would conveniently seem to be logic, Alice even comes up with a definition for one of the words, which Humpty accepts.

The question of Carroll's real intention in writing the *Alice* books comes up here. The parody of the literary critic in Humpty Dumpty seems to imply that not only was Carroll providing entertainment for his child friend, he was also setting out to upset the world of the literary critic. A sort of "double consciousness" speaks up in this episode and one wonders who his intended audience was when he wrote this poem of seemingly meaningless words. I say "seemingly" because just as Humpty manages to construct some meaning, so also do critics like Elizabeth Sewell, and Eric Partridge, to whom Sewell refers (120-122). But the way is led by Carroll himself, because it is he who has created Humpty Dumpty and put those words in his mouth. Also, in his Preface to *The Hunting of the Snark*, Carroll refers back to the Jabberwock, explaining in quite a serious tone how to pronounce certain words and how to derive meanings from others as if they were real words. To a child reader, the nonsense words may sound puzzling, but because of the rhythm and rhyme of the entire composition, it is possible to enjoy the poem just for its sounds. For the adult reader or critic, the same rhyme and context into which the words are put make the words lose their "nonsense" quality and sound like nouns, verbs, and

adjectives. It is possible therefore that Carroll may have been using a double perspective here, characteristic of his dual personality of the adult-child.

Like the poems considered above, the other poems in the *Alice* books seem to diverge very much from the Victorian notion of supplying moral lessons to children through literature and instead evoke some sort of violence or the other. *The Walrus and the Carpenter* in *Looking Glass*, in fact, shows violence in the basest form through the betrayal of innocent souls. The walrus and the carpenter invite some oysters to join them in a walk along the beach. Although the elder oyster refuses, neatly dressed and shod young oysters immediately follow until they all sit down to rest. It is then the walrus announces that it is time to eat and the oysters realize they are the prey. It is interesting to note that though the walrus takes an active role in the whole process, it is he who appears to feel sympathy for the poor innocents they have tricked. This may seem like his saving grace but it, in fact, marks him as the more malevolent of the two. In the end, each oyster is eaten and, unable to decide who is worse, Alice concludes that “(t)hey were *both* very unpleasant characters” (*Through the Looking Glass* 172).

Of course, children enjoy reading about violence, thus accounting for the popularity of fairy-tales whose structure and elements Carroll borrows, but fairy-tales generally employ violence as a means to show the triumph of good over evil. The *Alice* books convey no such message. Violence, it appears, is evoked for its own sake, just like the Queen of Hearts’ constant cry of “Off with his head!” Although the Queen’s order is never carried out, other violent actions in the *Alice* books, just as whimsical as the Queen’s, are. The pervasive quality of violence in Carroll’s books would suggest then a didactic purpose on the part of the author, a wish to convey a message, perhaps even a lesson to his readers. If Carroll was addressing his stories to children, he was, under the guise of a fairy-tale, warning them that the world in which they would be growing up was one that favored violence. Significantly, it is the adults who do the violence either spoken about or actually perpetrated in the *Alice* books (the Queen of Hearts, the Duchess, the White Knight’s story). On the other hand, by infusing violence into the didactic Victorian poems that preached gentleness and manners, Carroll was successful in conveying the message to adults that their world was hypocritical in teaching children one thing and themselves behaving contrarily. It is a message that is significant even today.

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