

Reflection of Reality in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to stress realistic elements in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice comes across situations not unknown to children from well-to-do families, participates in activities familiar to all children, she meets animals English children know from the countryside. Another connection with reality is achieved through allusions to some aspects of Victorian life and more specifically to the Liddell sisters and the events they experienced, and through the parodies of some well-known poems and songs of the day.

The adventures of Alice in Wonderland happen, as is explained at the end of the book, in her dream. Inevitably, they are full of strange and fabulous events; still, there is more reality than one would expect from a book that has become a synonym for dream and imagination. This paper attempts to focus on the realistic elements in this book.

Throughout the whole story Alice is involved in everyday activities, familiar to children: swimming, running, listening to tales and poems, playing games, dancing, having a tea party, meeting new people and expressing judgements about them, making friends; she observes cooking, discusses school and lessons, revises some pieces of school knowledge, recites poems. Except for the numerous sudden changes of her size, there is nothing that goes beyond children's experience of real life and their second-hand experience from fairy tales with speaking animals. Most of the animals, birds and insects that appear in the story are those that live in England – rabbit, mouse, lizard, caterpillar, hare, dormouse, to name just some of them – and thus familiar to children.

What must have made the story topical for Victorians are the allusions to concrete things that were a part of life in the 19th century, such as the mock turtle soup or Cheshire cheese, or to commonly used sayings like 'Mad as a hatter.' Nevertheless, since Carroll originally told the story to the three daughters of his superior, Henry George Liddell, Dean of Christ Church, there are many specific allusions to the girls themselves, their friends and pets: Alice's cat's name Dinah is identical with the name of the real Liddells' cat; when at the beginning Alice is bored as her sister's book is without pictures or conversation, it may reflect the fact that Alice was two years younger than Lorina Charlotte, the eldest daughter of the Liddells. Needless to say, unlike the sister's book, Alice's *Adventures* has numerous illustrations and consists predominantly of conversations; many analysts maintain that the mention of the book was made for the sake of contrast – Carroll's book was meant to be different, in order to please Alice. The story also refers to events the Liddell girls experienced together with Charles Dodgson, or Lewis Carroll, to use his pen name.

Hudson suggests that some names were derived from the participants of the expedition to Godstow on 4th July 1862 – the famous boating trip when Carroll told the first version of his story. Among the birds and animals in Chapters II and III, 'Dodo' perhaps was, according to Hudson, a reproduction of Carroll's stammer when he pronounced his name Dodgson, Duck was derived from Robinson Duckworth, his friend from Trinity College, Lory was Lorina, and Eaglet the youngest Liddell daughter Edith. Hudson also puts forward the notion that the second chapter, *The Pool of Tears*, was a reference to another trip taken earlier on a wet day; Carpenter and Prichard specify that this trip took place on 17th June 1862 and "the whole party was drenched with rain" (Carpenter and Prichard 1984:100). Chapter III opens: "They were indeed a queer-looking party that assembled on the

bank – the birds with draggled feathers, the animals with their fur clinging close to them, and all dripping wet, cross, and uncomfortable” (Carroll 1992:17). When listening to this description on 4th July 1962, Alice and her sisters must have imagined themselves equally soaked wet a fortnight ago, and enjoyed the allusion. In the book the wet creatures started to discuss how to get dry, and “after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them, as if she had known them all her life” (Carroll 1992:18). We can guess that such friendliness was characteristic of Alice Liddell as well. In the next line of the story Alice is reported to have “quite a long argument with the Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say “I am older than you, and must know better”” (Carroll 1992:18); the real Alice probably heard these words from Lorina quite often and both sisters must have recognized themselves in these lines.

Another allusion used in this chapter was to Havilland Chepmell’s *Short Course of History*, which the Liddells used in their lessons. When everybody is dripping wet, the Mouse wants to tell them a story to dry them: “Are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please!” (Carroll 1992:18) Then it starts reciting Chepmell’s text about William the Conqueror. Lory’s response is “Ugh!” Duck interrupts the Mouse with a question, and Alice makes a remark that the story does not dry her at all, and on Dodo’s suggestion of “the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies” (Carroll 1992:19) Eaglet reacts with words “Speak English! [...] I don’t know the meaning of half those long words, and, what’s more, I don’t believe you do either!” (Carroll 1992:19). Again, Alice, the Lory, the Eaglet, Duck and Dodo behave as their real models would probably do, and the Mouse reacts to their interruptions as a strict and stiff teacher. At the same time, Carroll probably mocks the dry language of the textbook, difficult for children to understand. Dodo takes the above quoted Eaglet criticism seriously, for he suggests Caucus-race to dry themselves and when asked by Alice what it is he just says that “the best way to explain it is to do it” (Carroll 1992:19). Caucus-race is the first of three games performed in the story; the others are guessing riddles in Chapter VII and Croquet in Chapter VIII.

As regards croquet, in the 1860s it was a relatively new but already popular recreational game, invented in Ireland in the 1830s and taken to England in the 1850s as a pastime of the aristocracy. At The Queen’s Croquet Ground a hedgehog was used as the ball, a flamingo the mallet, and playing cards as the wickets. The shapes of the things chosen for playing recall the original instruments, however cruel Carroll might seem to the poor living creatures. Children when playing use their imagination and substitute real things with accessible and sometimes quite unexpected ones – a piece of wood might be a ship, a broomstick, a gun or a doll – so young readers might be less shocked than adults when reading about the croquet game at the Queen’s Ground.

Chapter VI called Pig and Pepper sees the first appearance of the Cheshire cat: “The only things in the kitchen that did not sneeze, were the cook, and a large cat which was sitting on the hearth and grinning from ear to ear” (Carroll 1992:50). When Alice asks the Duchess why the cat grins like that, she explains “[i]t’s a Cheshire cat, and that’s why” (Carroll 1992:50). This name pun is said to be inspired by the idiom ‘to grin like a Cheshire cat’, used if someone has a very wide smile (Using English.com.) Its origin goes back to Cheshire cheese, one of the oldest English cheeses, produced in Cheshire and sold there formerly in the shape of a grinning cat.

In Chapter VII, A Mad Tea Party, there are again name allusions to the Liddells. According to Hudson “[t]he three little girls in the Dormouse’s story, Elsie, Lacie and Tillie, are only the three Liddells in another disguise: Elsie stands for L.C., the initials of Lorina Charlotte; Lacie is an anagram for Alice; and Matilda (Millie) was a family nickname for Edith.” This chapter was not in the original version, it was added later, as well as Chapter VI, Pig and Pepper. It exploits many puns; the obvious one is in the title and two main characters, the Hatter and the March Hare. Both these participants of the Mad tea party are in sayings connected with madness: ‘Mad as a March Hare’ is a common phrase commenting on the behaviour of rabbits during their breeding season, ‘Mad as a hatter’ most likely refers to the fact that many hatters in the 18th and 19th centuries suffered from Korsakoff’s symptom as a result of absorption of mercury used for softening felt; this illness is a memory disorder caused by a deficiency of vitamin B₁.

Chapter IX, The Mock Turtle Story, develops a pun on the name of the Mock Turtle. The Queen explains to Alice what a Mock Turtle is: “It’s the thing Mock Turtle soup is made from” (Carroll 1992:77). The Tenniel illustration of the Mock Turtle depicts it as a collection of creatures that make up the ingredients of mock turtle soup: parts of a calf that were not frequently used,

including the head, hooves, and tail; it shows a creature with the body of a turtle, and the head, hooves, and tail of a calf. When the Mock Turtle sings his song *Soup of the Evening*, rather than cannibalistic, it may be understood as an ode to himself. Like all the poems and songs in the book, this song is a parody. The original song, written by James M. Sayle, was called “*Star of the Evening, Beautiful Star*” and Carroll states in the August 1, 1862 entry of his diary that this song was performed for him as a trio by Lorina, Alice and Edith Liddell in the Liddell home during the summer of 1862. Another familiarization of the story, this time not exclusively for the Liddells, is achieved when the Mock Turtle tells Alice about his school days, the words for the subjects he describes resemble some real school subjects: Reeling and Writhing - Reading and Writing; branches of Arithmetic Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision - Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication and Division, respectively; Mystery - History; Drawling, Stretching and Fainting in Coils - Drawing, Sketching and Painting in Oils (Carroll 1992:80-81). The three Arts subjects were taught by the Drawling-master, “an old conger-eel, that used to come once a week” (Carroll 1992:81); this is a specific allusion to the art critic John Ruskin who came once a week to the Liddells to teach their children these subjects.

Another example of allusions to the Victorian reality are Carroll’s paraphrases or rather parodies of then well-known poems, through which he mocked the overly didactic children’s literature of the period. The first of them is Alice’s recitation of “*How Doth the Little Crocodile*” in Chapter II, a parody of the theologian and hymn-writer Isaac Watts’ poem, “*Against Idleness and Mischief*,” which begins “*How doth the little busy bee*”. Unlike the busy bee that gathers pollen all the day and labours hard to store wax and honey and thus improves itself, the crocodile only takes care of improving his shining tail and catches little fishes by merely opening his smiling jaws. Another Isaac Watt poem, “*The Sluggard*,” is paraphrased in Chapter X, *The Lobster Quadrille*. Its opening lines “‘Tis the voice of the sluggard; I heard him complain, / You have wak’d me too soon, I must slumber again.” are changed into “‘Tis the voice of the Lobster; I heard him declare, / You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.” Instead of the criticism of a lazy person from the Watt poems, Carroll lets Alice recite a funny poem about the lobster. The Gryphon, who asked Alice to repeat the *Sluggard* poem, comments: “That’s different from what I used to say when I was a child” (Carroll 1992:87).

Just as the busy bee from Watt’s poem is substituted by the cunning crocodile, the twinkling little star from the popular 19th century song “*The Star*” by Jane Taylor is in Carroll’s parody sung by the Hatter in Chapter VII, *A Mad Tea-party*, replaced by a mischievous little bat; Taylor’s line “*How I wonder what you are!*” is changed into “*How I wonder what you’re at!*” (Carroll 1992:60). As previously mentioned, in Chapter X Carroll exploited another Victorian song about a star, namely “*Star of the Evening, Beautiful Star*.” The longest poem in the book is “*You are Old, Father William*” in Chapter V, a parody of “*The Old Man’s Comforts and How He Gained Them*” by Robert Southey. In Southey’s poem, the curious young man learns that the reason why the old man is still hale and hearty and vigorous is that in the days of his youth he remembered God and so God has not forgotten his age. Carroll’s old man is also very healthy and fit: he incessantly stands on his head, though being uncommonly fat he can turn a back somersault, balance an eel on his nose, and eats up a goose with the bones and the beak (the poem is accompanied by four full-page illustrations of these particular skills of the old man – both in the version with Carroll’s original pictures and the version illustrated by John Tenniel). Nevertheless, the old man’s explanations of these skills are very secular: he used special ointment for his limbs, his jaw acquired muscular strength by arguing with his wife. When he is eventually fed up with the young man’s – his son’s – questions, he warns him “*Don’t give yourself airs! Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff? Be off, or I’ll kick you down stairs!*” (Carroll 1992:42). However harsh the words of Father William to his offspring sound, they seem to reflect reality better than the didactic poem by Southey.

The parent-son relationship also appears in the parody of the poem “*Speak Gently*” in Chapter VI which is called conversely – *Speak roughly*. This time the parent is the Duchess nursing her baby-boy. While in the original poem (credited to either G.V. Langford or David Bates in various sources) the readers were advised to speak gently to the little child for “*it is better far to rule by love than fear*”, the Duchess in her unusual lullaby not only recommends “*Speak roughly to your little boy / And beat him when he sneezes*” since “*He only does it to annoy, / Because he knows it teases*” (Carroll 1992:53), but she claims that this is what she herself does. The absurdity is in the fact that the room is full of pepper from the soup in a large cauldron on the fire which is being stirred by the cook, and

apart from the baby who is “sneezing and howling alternately without a moment’s pause” (Carroll 1992:51) also the Duchess and Alice have to sneeze occasionally.

Though Carroll obviously delighted in parodies of explicitly didactic poems, he exploited some light entertaining poems as well, such as Mary Howitt’s “The Spider and the Fly,” the first line of which reads “‘Will you walk into my parlour?’ said the spider to the fly.” In Chapter X when the Gryphon teaches Alice to dance the Lobster Quadrille, the Mock Turtle sings to them: “‘Will you walk a little faster?’ said a whiting to a snail. / ‘There’s a porpoise close behind us, and he’s treading on my tail.’ / See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance! / They are waiting on the shingle – will you come and join the dance? / Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, will you join the dance? / Will you, won’t you, will you, won’t you, won’t you join the dance?” (Carroll 1992:84). The last two lines of the stanza, functioning as a chorus, show Carroll’s playfulness and sense of rhythm. The only unmodified poem used in Alice is the well-known nursery rhyme The Queen of Hearts in Chapter XI, entitled “Who stole the tarts?” around which is created the scene with the court trial: the rhyme is read by the White Rabbit as the charge against the knave.

When reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* today, we enjoy Carroll’s playfulness reflected in the poems; the original Victorian readers, in addition, must have noticed and enjoyed his ‘naughtiness’ since they were familiar with many, if not all, the poems that inspired his brilliant parodies. At the same time, the paraphrases of the well-known poems facilitated the touch of reality.

Hudson suggests that Carroll “did not send Alice down the rabbit-hole on a summer’s afternoon for the benefit of a future generation of Freudians but for the present pleasure of three small Victorians”, who – as I have argued above – had the privilege of listening and then reading a book that was to a large extent inspired by their reality.

Works Cited:

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Abstract: Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* drops curious young Alice down a rabbit hole and into an underground world that just gets "curiouser and curiouser." In Wonderland, Alice attempts to understand and impose logic on this illogical dream-world as she faces off against the White Rabbit, the Cheshire-Cat, the Blue Caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, and ultimately the Queen of Hearts. Here, Alice plays a heroic role at the trial, and she emerges from Wonderland and awakens to reality. The last two chapters represent the overthrow of Wonderland and Alice's triumphant rebellion against the mayhem and madness that she experienced while she was lost, for awhile, in the strange world of Wonderland. Alice's adventures in wonderland. By Lewis Carroll. With forty-two illustrations by John Tenniel. Text from Project Gutenberg "Alice in Wonderland" (March, 1994 edition). For more information on Project Gutenberg, contact: Project Gutenberg, Michael S. Hart (hart@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu). P.O. Box 2782, Champaign, IL 61820.