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From a Caterpillar to a Butterfly: Bodily Changes in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to look at Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* as an enduring cultural and universal phenomenon. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that "her quest is a gendered quest during which Alice investigates types of feminine representation". (Talairach-Vielmas 52) This paper subscribes to this view and builds upon this to argue that Carroll delineates the pivotal stages of a woman's maturity by couching them in the fairy-tale elements of Wonderland. In order to establish this argument, the paper examines the representation of the female figure in both, the Dream-Child and the adult woman in the texts. Following this, the paper asserts that Carroll is alternatively sympathetic and critical of the changes a woman must undergo in her life. Finally, the paper concludes that the *Alice* books can be seen as one of the first Feminist texts in Children's Literature.

Key words: feminine representation, gender, feminist text, children's literature

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* has received a phenomenal response throughout the eons and will probably continue to do so, for generations to come. Predominant images like the Cheshire Cat's floating head, the Hookah smoking Caterpillar and the White Rabbit in his red coat continue to be an important part of popular culture even today. It is now 150 years from its conception and newer adaptations of the novel in the written and digital media continue to flood the markets. For instance, the legendary director Tim Burton created two movie adaptations of the Alice books, "Alice in Wonderland"(5th March, 2010) and "Alice Through the Looking Glass"(27th May, 2016).

Why then has Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* remained a cultural and universal phenomenon? Is it because of a precocious child who is wise beyond her station? Is it because of its universalism that appeals to the adult in a child and the child in an adult? Is it because of its nonsensical dialogue that is often counter-intuitive and paradoxical? It is perhaps the multi-faceted dream sequence of the book that brings out several interpretations. In her book *Alternative Alices: Visions and Revisions of Lewis Carroll's Alice books*, Carolyn Sigler writes that the dream structure and playful use of symbolic nonsense generated multiple and contradictory readings. More importantly, like dreams themselves, the books signify any number of things to the reader. (Sigler xiv) Will Brooker asserts that every generation interprets this novel in a way that is reflective of their contemporary culture. He states that the

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1930s subjected the text to a psychoanalytic reading, the 1960's did a psychedelic reading and the 1990's saw referrals of paedophilia in his text.(Silverman)

However, the text is first and foremost a bildungsroman wherein Alice is on a quest to find her identity. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests that "her quest is a gendered quest during which Alice investigates types of feminine representation". (Talairach-Vielmas 52)This paper subscribes to this view and builds upon this to argue that Carroll delineates the pivotal stages of a woman's maturity by couching them in the fairy-tale elements of Wonderland. In order to establish this argument, the paper examines the representation of the female figure in both, the Dream-Child and the adult woman in the texts. Following this, the paper asserts that Carroll is alternatively sympathetic and critical of the changes a woman must undergo in her life. Finally, the paper concludes that the *Alice* books can be seen as one of the first Feminist texts in Children's Literature.

Anthony Goldschmidt ushered in a new wave of psychosexual criticism on *Alice in Wonderland* with his essay "*Alice in Wonderland* Psycho-Analysed". According to him,

> The symbolism begins almost at once. Alice runs down the rabbit-hole after the White Rabbit and suddenly finds herself falling down "what seemed to be a very deep well". Here we have what is perhaps the best-known symbol of coitus. Next, the dreamer (who identifies himself with Alice throughout) is seen pursuing the White Rabbit down a series of passages, and it is worth noting that Stekel interprets the pursuit in dreams of something we are unable to catch as representing an attempt to make up for a disparity in age. Now the dreamer enters a "long low hall", round which are a number of doors, all locked"(Phillips 330)

Here, it would seem as though the sexual symbolism is rather forced and Goldschmidt himself admits that "no critic upon whom the Freudian theory has made even the slightest impression can refrain from recognizing sexual symbolism in any medium, when it is clearly manifested." (Phillips 329)While several critics believe Goldschmidt's analysis parodied the Freudian theories of psychoanalysis, it did not stop scholars like Martin Grotjahn and William Empson from approaching the *Alice* texts with a strict Freudian lens. It is prudent to examine the works of these scholars as they were the pioneer members in psychoanalyzing Carroll's works. For instance, William Empson suggests that she is "a father in getting down to the hole, a foetus at the bottom, and can only be born by becoming a mother and producing her own amniotic fluid". (Douglas-Fairhurst)

Despite the psychosexual connotations the book has received through the ages, the *Alice* books have been immortalized as a celebration of childhood innocence as well. A similar conflict is observed in the *Alice* books also wherein the protagonist is alternatively in control of the situation or drowning in a pool of her own tears. In fact, until Alice meets the Caterpillar, she has no agency over her growth spurts. The dream-child is forced to undergo a series of bodily changes – she grows and shrinks several times and in an encounter with the Pigeon, we find that she has an abnormally long neck, which causes the Pigeon to mistake her for a serpent.

The bodily changes that Alice goes through and the alarm she faces at having her form manipulated constantly can be the story of any child. To illustrate, after she almost drowns in a pool of her own tears, she experiences a growth spurt which traps her in the White-Rabbit's house. She initially consumes the contents of a bottle labelled "DRINK ME" as she is certain that "SOMETHING interesting is sure to happen"*(Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* 44)and she is hopeful that it will make her bigger.

Unfortunately, she grows at an alarmingly fast rate and soon, she sticks out an arm and foot up the window and chimney respectively. Not surprisingly, Alice wants to go back to the safe space of reality where "it was much pleasanter"(Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass 46)* and "one wasn't always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about mice and rabbits." (Carroll, A*lice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass 46)*

The illustration depicting this scene has foetal connotations, thus reiterating Alice's desire to return to a better place. Natov suggests that this scene depicts her "sense of discomfort at being a newly arrived adult." (Elick 232)However, Alice soon learns to adapt to her current situation and perhaps, embraces it as well when she sorrowfully claims, "I'm grown up now" (Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 46) and more practically states that "there's no room to grow up any more *here*."*(Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 46) Eating or drinking always had adverse effects in Wonderland and several critics observe that it is a way for Carroll to control his dream-child within his imaginary landscape.

Moreover, it would seem as though Carroll tried to imprint his own peculiar eating habits on Alice. It is no secret that Carroll ate very small portions and he often took his own carefully prepared meals to friends' homes, when invited to dinner. (Garland 26) He often denied luncheon invitations as well and his abject dislike for food and the process of eating itself is well expressed in a letter where he states that: "I always decline luncheons. I have no appetite for a meal at that time, and you will perhaps sympathise with my dislike for sitting to watch others eat and drink". (Cohen, Volume 1, 319) as quoted in (Garland 26)

The episode wherein Alice is trapped within the White-Rabbit's house is also symbolic of Carroll's views on female growth. As Anna Krugovoy Silver states:

> The scene expresses Carroll's belief (already encountered in the Dormouse's tale) that maturation entails imprisonment in the home and that growth is a "sorrowful" occurrence. If maturity and growth are associated with the consumption of food, and if maturation is viewed ambivalently, then appetite necessarily becomes a more ambiguous feeling in the Alice books than it first appears to be. (Silver 74)

Indeed, as Sliver states, food and appetite play a major role in shaping the female characters in the text. While Alice is forced to consume food in tiny portions from dainty cups and bottles, all the older women in the text are depicted as grotesque and corpulent characters, whose appetites can never be sated. The texts suggest that the emotions and drives of the three adult women in *Alice in Wonderland,* namely the Cook, the Duchess and the Queen of Hearts are largely controlled by food.

We are first introduced to the Cook and the Duchess in the Kitchen where the Cook is stirring a large cauldron of soup and the Duchess in nursing a baby. However, there is far too much pepper in the soup and "too much of it in the air" *(Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* 82) as well. This impacts both the women greatly as, the Cook suddenly loses her temper and starts throwing everything around her at the Duchess and the baby. The Duchess in turn, retaliates and soon, we witness a scene wherein two adult women are seen flinging kitchen utensils at each other, with little or no concern for the safety of the baby.

Similarly, the Queen of Hearts, who is often viewed as the antithetical figure to Alice's character has a ravenous appetite as well. As Carina Garland suggests:

> The theft of her tarts renders her even more murderous than usual, leading her to order decapitation, landing Alice in a courtroom and in harm's way, and also resulting in the potential destruction of all the characters Alice has encountered (who become key witnesses in the trial) (Garland 28)

Furthermore, while all the adult women in the text have the agency to eat whenever and whatever they wanted to, Alice is seldom given any choice in the matter. To illustrate, in the trial scene, Alice expresses the desire to eat for the very first time, when she envisions the large dish of tarts on the table, strategically positioned in the middle of the courtroom. However, Alice is never given the chance to eat the tarts. She steadily gets hungrier as the trial proceeds and in a surprising turn of events, is named a witness to the proceeding trial, which incidentally addresses the Queen's raging question – "Who stole the Tarts?"(Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass 162)*

Here, it is interesting to note that Alice experiences the desire to eat when she confronts the Queen. Not only does she begin to assert her authority in the trial scene but she also discovers her identity for the very first time in Wonderland. Until this point in the text, when questioned about her identity, Alice always seems doubtful about the nature of her identity. However, when she meets the Queen, not only is she aware of her name but she also begins to understand the illusory nature of Wonderland as she tells herself – "Why, they're only a pack of cards after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" (Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* 116)

This epiphany suggests that the Queen is in fact, the biggest part of Alice's personality. As Nina Auerbach wonderfully put it "The sea that almost drowns her is composed of her own tears, and the dream that nearly obliterates her is composed of fragments of her own personality."(Auerbach 34) This then leads to the conclusion that Alice's personality mirrors the Queen in several ways. Although not very apparent, Alice is quite rude and bossy, like the Queen. For instance, when she barges into the Mad-Hatter's Tea Party uninvited, she finds a place for herself regardless of the fact that the original members of the Tea Party vehemently tell her that there is no space for her. Apart from this, Alice represents the Queen in her animalistic sentiments. The Queen's impulse to decapitate and destroy those who displease her parallel's Alice's own urge to consume and annihilate. For instance, when Alice meets the little puppy in the woods, she is worried that it would eat her. Similarly, in the Caucus race, Alice offends the mouse terribly when she tells it: "Dinah is our cat. And she's such a capital one for catching mice you can't think!" *(Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 26)

Not only do her actions represent the Queen in the final scene but Alice also gains an insight to her sexuality in the trial scene as it is here that she finally experiences the primal urges of hunger and desire for food. In the earlier instances, she merely acts upon the instructions of an invisible hand and consumed food to manipulate her body. By acknowledging the desire to eat, Alice essentially embraces her sexuality. As Talairach-Vielmas asserts, "Food always acted as a veiled metaphor for sexuality"(Talairach-Vielmas 54)and thus, by expressing her hunger, it can be stated explicitly that Alice regains her sexuality.

Apart from grudgingly presenting his child protagonist with her latent sexuality, Carroll exposes Alice to his notions of Motherhood as well. We encounter three types of Mothers in the text; the Pigeon, the Duchess and the Queen Mother. Amongst these three figures, the Pigeon is seen to be the most nurturing figure. The Duchess on the other hand, tosses her baby around haphazardly and is rather a distressing portrayal of the mother figure.

While these characters' influence Alice to a certain degree, her biggest confrontation is with the Queen Mother. Alice's encounter with the mother figure is in tandem with Kristeva's theories on motherhood and child separation. According to her, an individual can construct his or her identity only by the act of matricide. To quote Kristeva:

> "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is recovered as erotic object (as is the case for male heterosexuality or female homosexuality), or it is transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire, which eroticizes the other (the other sex, in the case of the heterosexual woman) or transforms cultural constructs into a "sublime" erotic object (one thinks of the cathexes, by men and women, in social bonds, intellectual and aesthetic productions, etc.)."(Kristeva 342)

Knoepflmacher has some interesting insights about the representation of the adult women in the text, which are in conjunction with Kristeva's concept of matricide as well. According to him Carroll follows the footsteps of William Wordsworth in their "sororal self" which in turn stems from the "antecedent of displacement" for the mother figure. He goes on to say:

> "To a Romantic poet eager to assert unity in the face of division, the brother-sister relation can offer a blending that recapitulates the primal union between mother and child. Not only were William and Dorothy formed in the same womb, but they also were imprinted by the same parent before being pressed into different gender roles. In a passage that captures the plight of later imaginative nineteenth-century orphans such as the Bronte children, Wordsworth notes in The Prelude that the early loss of their "honoured Mother, she who was the heart / And hinge of all our learnings and our loves" could only be compensated by the interplay of siblings. The maternal presence that Wordsworth so forcefully dramatized in subsequent poems is not directly invoked in "Tintern Abbey." It is immanent, however, in a Nature described, much like the matriarch of The Prelude, as the "anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, /The guide, the guardian of my heart" (lines 109-10). (Knoepflmacher 14)

Continuing on this vein, he says that Carroll's "regressive yearning" for the mother figure is displayed in his interest in Wordsworth and his poetry. Carroll also wrote a poem called "Solitude" which copies the Wordsworthian style and form in its landscape. Here are a few lines from the poem:

> Here may the silent tears I weep
> Lull the vexed spirit into rest,
> As infants sob themselves to sleep
> Upon a mother's breast.
> But when the bitter hour is gone,
> And the keen throbbing pangs are still,
> Oh, sweetest then to couch alone
> Upon some silent hill! (Carroll 24)

This poem is quite similar to the theme in *Alice in Wonderland*- of wanting to escape adulthood and remain in the statism of childhood forever. As Knoepflmacher's extensive research indicates, Carroll seems to have depicted his women as monsters and anti-maternal figures because of his own sense of loss as Victorian mothers were forced to "discourage the eroticized bonds that had given her children an early sense of unbound power" and hence, he forces his own heroine to experience this sense of hatred and regression towards the mother figure. Thus, Alice can only discover her identity when she kills the Queen.

Carroll then is alternatively sympathetic and cruel to the female characters in the *Alice* books. Just as he puts his protagonist through situations wherein her very identity could be erased permanently, he also gives her the agency to control her growth spurts. This is a power that is denied to children in the real world. More importantly, it is eventually Alice who has the power to destabilize Wonderland entirely and she does just this, towards the end.

Similarly, the adult women in the text are seen to be in positions of power. It is the Queen who has the power to execute the folk of Wonderland. While the King silently pardoned her victims of rage, it should be noted that the position of power and respect is given to the female character. *Alice in Wonderland* then is clearly a feminist text where the major preoccupation is the female child and her psychosexual development.

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