

# *Through the Looking-Glass: Alice's Coming of Age*

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Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), titled *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), takes the beloved Alice into a new world featuring a live game of chess, a few bizarre characters, and a repetition of classic nursery rhymes. While nonsense proves to be the bread-and-butter of Lewis Carroll's writing style, it is not without purpose; the narrative structuring of the chess game and Alice's pursuit of queenhood, coupled with the exchanges with the various characters, fall in line with a classic coming of age tale, and present Alice as a figure within a Bildungsroman.

Though it may be easy to overlook among the nonsense of the work, *Through the Looking-Glass* contains the typical conventions of a Bildungsroman. Suzanne Hader offers the defining qualities of a Bildungsroman on *The Victorian Web*: discontent that sends the heroine on her journey, personal growth, trials, the presence of a guiding figure, and an ending with the heroine being accommodated into society. By reading this classic work of literature as a coming of age tale, readers get a glimpse at how Carroll felt about Victorian social rules, as well as his hopes for his child friend and inspiration for the *Alice* books, Alice Liddell.

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Similar to how Alice's curiosity led her throughout Wonderland, Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass* feels a strong sense of curiosity, which sends her into the world of the looking-glass. Alice says, "Oh Kitty, how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I'm sure it's got, oh! such beautiful things in it!" (Carroll 109). Alice is only seven and a half; for a child this young, curiosity breeds discontent. Just making it through the looking-glass is not satisfying enough; when Alice learns that this new world she's exploring is a "great huge game of chess" she sets a new goal for herself. "I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join—though of course I should *like* to be a Queen, best" (123). Though the desire to become a queen someday is quite normal in child play, Alice's quest to become queen is not without many trials and her own personal growth, much in line with the Bildungsroman genre.

Alice's growth in *Through the Looking-Glass* is evident in comparing her in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Though she is only six months older, Alice is different. This is evident even in the beginning of the work; rather than introducing us to a dreamy Alice dissatisfied by a lack of entertainment as in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll presents the older Alice as more mature, acting as a sort of governess to her kitten, reprimanding him (106). Alice is still purposeful, but more emotionally mature. In Wonderland, Alice often found herself in arguments with the inhabitants. In the looking-glass, Alice brushes off insults, such as from the Rose in the garden (120). Not only is Alice purposeful and mature, she is rather intelligent. After beginning the chaotic game of chess, Carroll shows her knowledge of the game: "She very soon came to an open field, with a wood on the other side of it: it looked much darker than the last wood, and Alice felt a *little* timid about going into it. However,

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on second thoughts, she made up her mind to go on: ‘for I certainly won’t go back,’ she thought to herself, and this was the only way to the Eighth Square” (132). Alice knows she cannot go back; she is a pawn, and pawns are unable to move backwards (Gardner 208). Alice also realizes that her only way to becoming queen is to keep moving. Though Alice begins the work as a purposeful, mature, and particularly bright child, her personal growth continues throughout her quest as she is faced with many trials.

*Through the Looking-Glass* is not lacking at all in nonsense episodes; however, even though the bewildering exchanges with the inhabitants of the looking-glass are entertaining and mostly humorous, they serve as trials for Alice to overcome on her quest. Carroll, having been very interested in logic games and mathematics, employs reversal as a trial for Alice (Carpenter 59). The mirroring is just one part of the systematic framework of *Through the Looking-Glass*. Alice is determined to have an adventure, but the reversal serves as a roadblock to her journey when she attempts to go to the garden:

“So, resolutely turning her back upon the house, she set out once more down the path, determined to keep straight on till she got to the hill. For a few minutes all went on well, and she was just saying ‘I really *shall* do it this time—’ when the path gave a sudden twist and shook itself (as she described it afterwards), and the next moment she found herself actually walking in at the door” (117).

This trial is resolved when she receives advice from the Rose to “walk the other way” (120). Though the trial is an important key in understanding the mirroring effect Carroll uses to structure the work, it could also give some insight to Carroll’s ideas about Victorian social rules. Popularly known for teaching children to keep

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a straight path in life, this Victorian idea did not serve Alice well in her desire for adventure. Carroll could have meant this as a message to his friend, Alice Liddell, as well as other young Victorian children.

Alice's encounter with the Red Queen serves also as a trial with a lesson; the Red Queen speaks and acts much like a governess would, demanding that she curtsey, and always refer to queens as "your Majesty" (121). Alice displays her maturity when she gets offended by the Red Queen's tone, but still remains silent (122). The Red Queen gives Alice a view of what's to come on her journey: "So you'll go *very* quickly through the Third Square—by the railway, I should think—and you'll find yourself in the Fourth Square in no time. Well *that* square belongs to Tweedledee and Tweedledum—the Fifth is mostly water—the Sixth belongs to Humpty Dumpty" (124). The Red Queen goes on: "the Seventh Square is all forest—however, one of the Knights will show you the way—and in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it's all feasting and fun!" (125). By doing as the Red Queen says and being polite, Alice receives information on how to achieve her goal of becoming queen. This trial does, however, end with a hint of Victorian advice: "Speak in French when you ca'n't think of the English for a thing—turn out your toes as you walk—and remember who you are!" (125). The Victorian tone is present in the Red Queen's advice to "remember who you are"; Carroll knew the importance of one's station in life. Ruth Jenkins argues that identity is an important facet in Alice's story in relation to Victorian ideas: "Carroll's companion stories of Alice's adventures reveal extreme anxieties of the Victorian era's efforts to secure its cultural boundaries. . . Alice is child and adult, the adolescent searching for her sense of self. She cannot maintain a stable sense of who she is, and with multiple identities, she threatens the symbolic order" (Jenkins 79). While the Red Queen seems benevolent in giving

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Alice an overview of what her journey will be, Carroll uses the Red Queen to present Victorian ideas that he felt were unsuitable for children. The Red Queen is a symbol of fury, which he didn't desire for children to experience.

As it turns out, remembering who she is does become a problem for Alice; when she walks into the wood where things have no names, Carroll provides another issue of identity. Carroll, being keen on systems, shows how consciousness grows with language. Alice and the fawn walk together through the wood, until they exit into an open field; "Here the fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arm. 'I'm a Fawn!' it cried out in a voice of delight. 'And, dear me! you're a human child!' A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed" (134). Without language or identity, the fawn cannot recognize Alice as a threat, but once the identities are applied again, the fawn then categorizes Alice as a human, therefore a threat. This trial of figuring out who she is exists in a nonsense episode, but has deeper implications about the development of identity. Humans impose identities on other beings, thus uniting some and separating others. Carroll is acknowledging the power of inflicting ideas (such as those of identity) on children, and how it can harm unity with those categorized as "others" (Gubar 120).

Though Humpty Dumpty places himself above Alice in terms of intelligence, Alice's encounter with him shows how her child-like intelligence serves her better since she is not as prideful as Humpty. Alice is familiar with the nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty, and this gives her a leg up. She recites the rhyme, ending incorrectly: "All the King's horses and all the King's men / Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty in his place again" (157). Alice realizes the last line is too

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long, but is smart enough to realize that the incorrect ending saves Humpty from hearing of his fate. Alice's conversation with Humpty exhausts her; he corrects her, belittles her, and criticizes her. Though the Red Queen also corrected Alice, she gave her valuable information about her journey, whereas Humpty is simply abrasive. Humpty's remarks are ironic: "Now, take a good look at me! I'm one that has spoken to a King, *I am*: mayhap you'll never see such another: and, to show you I'm not proud, you may shake hands with me!" (158). He ironically says that he is not proud, but he is the embodiment of the old adage "pride goeth before a fall." Of course, he meets his fate after Alice takes leave of him (167). Carroll's employment of Humpty Dumpty's story is a reflection of how strict intellectualism and pride makes people more susceptible to a "fall" from their position.

In a typical Bildungsroman story, the heroine eventually finds an individual to guide her on her way; the White Knight serves as a guide to Alice in her last moves before becoming queen. When the Red Knight threatens Alice and her place as queen, the White Knight defeats him in a battle (178). The White Knight assures Alice that she'll still become queen: "I'll see you safe to the end of the wood" (179). Staying true to the theme of chess, the Knight falls off of his horse several times; in chess, knights have to turn on a dime (183). Hearing of his curious inventions, Alice is gentle, and not condescending. The White Knight serves as a reflection of Carroll himself, and it's likely that this was purposeful. Like the Knight, Carroll was an inventor. Carroll's inventions, like the Knight's, were cleverly created, but very unlikely to ever be made (Gardner 277). The exchange between Alice and the White Knight is also a reflection of Carroll's relationship with Alice Liddell; "Of all the things that Alice saw in her journey Through The Looking-Glass, this was the

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one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday" (186). That Alice remembers this scene the best of all fulfills a wish that Carroll had that Alice Liddell would remember him fondly. When Alice is close to her last step to becoming queen, the Knight makes a request:

"'You've only a few yards to go,' he said, 'down the hill and over that little brook, and then you'll be a Queen—But you'll stay and see me off first?' he added as Alice turned with an eager look in the direction to which he pointed. 'I sha'n't be long. You'll wait and wave your handkerchief when I get to that turn in the road? I think it'll encourage me, you see.'" (189).

Alice obliges this request, hoping that it did encourage him. The hesitancy the White Knight has in letting Alice go is quite reflective of Carroll's sadness over Alice Liddell growing up. Alice couldn't wait to become queen, just as most little girls, and likely Alice Liddell, can't wait to grow up. Carroll displays the qualities he hopes for Alice Liddell in the character Alice: kindness, patience, and politeness.

The last stage in a Bildungsroman story is integration into society and completeness in coming of age; the last step of Alice's quest is to become the queen. Though Alice has been so anxious to become the queen, she quickly realizes that it's not as great as she thought it would be. As soon as she is crowned, her demeanor changes:

"'I never expected I should be Queen so soon—and I'll tell you what it is, your Majesty,' she went on, in a severe tone (she was always rather fond of scolding herself), 'it'll never do for you to be lolling about on the grass like that! Queens have to be dignified, you know!'" (191).

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Alice's tone is prideful, and even reminiscent of Humpty Dumpty's tone. Though she should have power now, Alice has none; she has to pass a test, and the questions asked by the Red Queen are completely ludicrous. Alice also loses her physical autonomy, since both of the queens fall asleep on her (196). Between the two queens, she is literally and figuratively under pressure, and that pressure will only continue. Alice is forced to host a dinner, though she did not invite any of the guests herself (199). When Alice asks if she should cut the mutton, the Red Queen says, "Certainly not . . . it isn't etiquette to cut anyone you've been introduced to" (199). The Victorian pun on "cut" means to ignore someone. Laura Mooneyham White held that Carroll uses the Red Queen and Alice to make a statement on the effect of authority:

"The events of *Through the Looking-Glass* show that Carroll believed the perfection of girls would be marred by a yearning after political power or even adulthood . . . *Through the Looking-Glass* illustrates the disappointing consequences awaiting the girl who would be queen" (White 113).

Alice's coming of age as a queen does not suit her; when she's had enough, she pulls the tablecloth, creating more chaos, and shakes the Red Queen (203). Alice finds herself shaking her kitten; she has left the looking-glass and returned home. Rather than becoming accommodated in the looking-glass as the queen, Alice refuses to take any more frustration from the infantilizing Red Queen, and sends herself back into childlike petulance (Knoepflmacher 28). Similar to the ending of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, when Alice has had enough, she loses her temper and takes control. Alice has learned that being the queen is not as wonderful as she thought.

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* serves many different roles. It has the ability to entertain



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children, and it has for over a century. For adults, his work satisfies a sentimental longing for a return to childhood. By reading *Through the Looking-Glass* in terms of the conventions of the Bildungsroman genre, readers gain an understanding of the pressures of coming of age in Victorian society. Lewis Carroll's friendship with Alice Liddell is something of a wonder to many. If one thing is evident in his feelings about the child, it's that he bitterly lamented that she had to grow up. By restricting readings of *Through the Looking-Glass* and only focusing on the employment of logic games, or the use of classic nursery rhymes, or simply considering it as a work of children's literature, readers lose a message that is fundamentally important to Carroll's motivation in writing the novel: the warning that growing up is not as wonderful as it may seem.

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