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England in Wonderland

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The Victorian era characterized a unique time period in England’s history, one inundated with clashes between change and conformity. New ideas of socialism, feminism, and enlightenment thinking conflicted with old age values of religious and institutional compliance. As a result, uncertainty in both individual and national identities swelled as the people began to lose faith in long accepted practices (Shepherd). The novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, written under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll, embodies the confusion and disorganization that infiltrated British society during this era. Within *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll criticizes outdated traditions and irrational behaviors through an exaggerated mockery of British society in the seemingly mad characters and nonsensical occurrences in his novel.

Carroll’s portrayal of his female characters exemplifies the expected behaviors of women in England and their attitudes towards their role in society. Prior to the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women, particularly those in the middle and upper classes, lived under the “angel of the house” ideal, a popular phrase coined from Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same name. His poem depicts the perfect housewife as “modest, chaste, and innocent” and a “domestic goddess of the middle class” whose sole priority in life revolves around the care of her husband and children (Kuhl 171, 173). Within *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the first females that Alice encounters are the Cook and the Duchess, both of which represent the stereotypical expectations for women in British society. The Cook “was busily stirring the soup” throughout the entirety of Alice’s conversation with the Duchess, and appears to have little contribution or worth to Wonderland beyond her responsibilities as a cook in the home (Carroll, 83). However, she does not represent the “prototypical model of the obedient and fearful maid,” but instead, a middle class woman attempting to rebel against the upper class authority of the Duchess and social expectations (Romera 17). She peppers the soup far too much in order to purposefully illicit a reaction from the Duchess, and even goes so far as to take the “cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach” at her (Carroll 82). The Cook refuses to accept the docility and domesticity expected of her by society, and challenges both class structures and gender roles through her actions. Similarly, despite her upper class status, the Duchess’ role seems to revolve around the care of a baby, a task she clearly despises. She continues to toss “the baby violently up and down” throughout her conversation with Alice, before “flinging the baby” at Alice so she can depart to play croquet with the Queen (Carroll 83, 84). To the Duchess, the baby “is a burden,” and her behavior towards it “is a direct result from the Victorian belief that it was compulsory for women to be socially acceptable to have children” (Romera 17). This obligation of bearing children created unhappiness and resentment among women towards the domestic expectations placed upon them, and their lack of agency over the course of their lives. This overbearing control over women partially stems from the belief that women are unreasonable and foolish, and ultimately unable to handle any sort of authoritative power. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll mocks these beliefs through his portrayal of the Queen as overly irrational and hysterical, both characteristics that women were believed to embody in England during this time. She constantly shrieks “off with their heads” at any bystander for little to no reason, and appears incapable of remaining logical and calm.
England in Wonderland

Although the Queen’s actions obviously reflect an extreme exaggeration, the fear of a woman in charge was the dominant reason behind the push back against women’s rights in England. In addition, the King seems “infantile and weak” in comparison to the Queen, as he inspires less terror than her and continuously has to pardon her demands (Romera 18). His “masculinity and dominance are gone,” and therefore his lack of typical male dominance would be perceived negatively among the men in British society (Romera 18). Carroll’s depiction of the tyranny of the Queen and the emasculated nature of the King ridicules male fears and insecurities towards the women’s rights movement during the Victorian era.

During this time of change, those in power attempted to dissuade not only the possibility of female authority but also the stirrings of a rebellion against the government and class system. The British identity had started to diversify, and people began to lose confidence in their place in the world and in the traditions that once stood undisputed (Shepherd). This uncertainty in the sense of self becomes apparent in works like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, when Alice’s confusion through her journey in Wonderland mirrors the internalized fears of the general populace. Following the time of industrialization, the British, like Alice, began to feel as though they were thrust into a brand new world, one in which few things made sense. Alice, upon encountering the questioning caterpillar remarks that she “hardly knows” who she is and that she “must have changed several times” upon falling down the rabbit hole that she no longer feels like herself (Carroll 64, 65). Although Alice speaks of her changes in a literal sense, with regards to her height and all that she has experienced, her altered state reveals a deeper truth about British society in the Victorian era. In reality, the metaphorical rabbit hole represents the rapid social, political, and technological advances that characterized the mid-nineteenth century; changing the structure and outlook of life so much so that the British people could no longer recognize their own native country. Surrounded by nonsensical rules and conflicting ideologies, Alice “loses hold on time and with it her own identity, as well as the identity of things and the world,” just as the people of England (Groth 668). As the development of factories and the economic boom created immense poverty and women were continuously denied equal treatment, the British for the first time began to question the complete power and authority of institutions. Within Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Alice constantly questions the system of government and demands answers to the irrational practices of Wonderland and its inhabitants. However, these actions become perceived negatively because both in Wonderland and in England conformity to the rules and institutions is expected. Upon Alice’s conversation with the Duchess following the croquet game, the Duchess criticizes her for “thinking about something,” because it makes one “forget to talk” (Carroll 113, 114). Similarly, the British government also discouraged this type of creative thought for it could challenge the power of the monarchy and traditional ways of life. In Wonderland, and therefore in England, “it is the rules themselves that create the nonsense,” inspiring a growing frustration not only for Alice but also for the British populace as they realize the futility of institutions and their unchecked power (Hadomi Elbaz 142). In order for these institutions to remain in control, conformity by all of the members of society to these rigid and absurd rules was essential, and therefore individuality and self identity was strongly discouraged. In the novel, the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle perform the Lobster-Quadrille, a song and dance that repeatedly pressures viewers to “join the dance,” and anyone who refuses becomes “further off from England” and “nearer is to France” (Carroll 128). This implies that those who refuse to conform to society distance themselves from England and cannot consider themselves true citizens of the state. The Lobster-Quadrille insults those who do not abide to social expectations by insinuating that their disobedience compares them to the French; a rival nation who had
recently experienced a bloody and unstable rebellion against the monarchy earlier in the nineteenth century. England during this time famously “lead the world in keeping mute in the face of adversity,” for the British government enforced allegiance and quelled insurgence at all costs to remain in power (Tosi 78).

In order to maintain control over the British people, the enforcement of illogical laws through faulty and unfair trials becomes a focal point in Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Towards the conclusion of the novel, the sheer nonsensical madness and confusion of the trial scene satirizes the realities of the British legal system. First, the King demands that the jury “consider [their] verdict” before any of the witnesses or evidence becomes available, satisfied with determining the accused’s guilt upon the whimsy of the jurors and himself (Carroll 137). He also appears to have no idea as to what details have relevance to the case at hand, debating random testimony as “important” or “unimportant” simply “as if he were trying which word sounded best” (Carroll 146). Despite the “realistic effort of this court” within Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland to deliver a fair verdict, the trial becomes bogged down by the “rule-bound insanity” demanded by the royalty that only serves to muddle the process (Hadomi Elbaz 142, Tosi 77). This foolish and unreasonable behavior demonstrates a clear ridicule of the high standing members of British society responsible for overseeing such discourse, and for the irrational explanations for their actions. As a result, the unfairness of the trial demonstrates the power of authoritative upper class figures to manipulate the outcomes of the legal system to their advantage, amounting to an increase in the frustrations of the lower classes. Often within the legal system, working class people experienced mistreatment and injustice because of their lower social stature (Johnson 149). The Hatter, when called as a witness in the trial becomes subjected to harsh threats to present the evidence in a suitable fashion to the King, and not to “be nervous” or the King would have him “executed on the spot,” a clearly ludicrous demand (Carroll 139). The Hatter pleads on several occasions that he is but “a poor man,” while the King constantly belittles him for his social stature, insisting he “stand down” at the conclusion of the Hatter’s testimony (Carroll 141, 142). When the Hatter than explains that, he “ca’n’t go no lower” because as a working class man he is already “on the floor” of society, the King insists that he “may sit down” regardless, because his poverty exempts him from legitimate and fair treatment (Carroll 142). During the Victorian era, British legal courts embodied the fact that “there was a deeply entrenched middle-class mid-Victorian prejudice against the character and behaviour of manual workers,” and therefore, obtaining a just trial as a member of the working class became difficult and unrealistic (Johnson 147). In addition, the lack of education for common people decreased the likeliness of a proper trial as jurors. The jurors in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland represent the ineptitude and idiocracy of the common people, who upon tasked with deciding the outcome of the case must put “down their names” on their slates, “for fear they should forget them before the end of the trial” (Carroll 136). The imbecility of the jurors also mocks the supposed integrity of the nineteenth century British courts, in which the responsibility of such a serious process lies upon a group of incompetent citizens unable to understand the complexity of their roles. Ultimately, the epically flawed nature of the British legal system as a whole “can be argued as being an essentially British approach to life, self-effacing, eccentric, egocentric, and possibly autistic,” in that society lives purposefully ignorant of the underlying rot that exists in their way of life (Tosi 78). Altogether, the senseless trial and the ridiculous conduct of all involved emphasizes the theme of insanity throughout the novel as a reflection of the subtle madness in the structure of British society during this time.
Within *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll reveals through exaggeration and nonsense the underlying flaws of British life, and the impact of the struggle between change and conformity during the Victorian era. The British began to question not only their role in society, but also the supposed unquestionable power of the government and the social expectations imposed upon them. This loss of identity fostered confusion over women’s rights, the authority of the monarchy, and the efficacy of the legal system, all of which become incorporated into *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as comical mockeries of reality. Alice’s adventures within the fictional Wonderland symbolize the hidden fears and doubts of the British populace, and reveal the harsh truths about daily life in Victorian England.
Bibliography


