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*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland  
& Through the Looking-Glass*

LEWIS CARROLL



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*Alice's Adventures  
in Wonderland  
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Through the  
Looking-Glass*

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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

The book in your hands is the most accessible of all literary masterpieces, and one of the strangest. A number of books for children, including Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* and A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, have a charm and humour which can survive for the adult reader, partly for the sake of old association, partly in their own right. The *Alice* books far transcend that category. They are major works at either level. For a child there could hardly be a better, more effortless, introduction to great literature. Here, in simple



English, are fast-moving, funny, fantastical stories which repeatedly break out into riddles, puzzles and rhymes. They instantly entertain, yet everywhere seem to offer more than meets the eye, more than can be readily explained. For any intelligent child they leave an aftertaste: they have somehow hinted at new worlds of communication and experience. For the adult these are likewise entertaining works, diversified with paradox and parody, but also astonishing exercises in literary premonition, anticipating, and shedding light on, the work of some of the greatest twentieth-century writers, both in prose and in verse.

It has become academically fashionable to claim that these are children's books no longer read by children. I cannot see why this should be the case, unless parents have lost their nerve. The historical and cultural impediments are of the trivial kind that an imaginative child can negotiate with ease – a few background details, three or four passages of an unfamiliar kind of sentimentality. The first ten minutes of the film *Jurassic Park*, a notorious recent child-pleaser, are far more bewildering than anything in *Alice*. Young readers, like young viewers, are perfectly capable of hanging on through obscurities till the story clarifies. They should be given the chance.

My suspicion is that this view has emerged not in acknowledgement of the complaints of bored young readers but as a consequence of the extent to which the *Alice* books have been academicised. As hinted above, they have rightly come to be seen as major proto-Modernist texts, pre-figuring and influencing the work of Joyce, Eliot, Kafka and Nabokov, among others. Carroll deals in philosophical and linguistic problems and sophisticated parody, all calling for explanation. Because he chooses to take his heroine into an enigmatic and sometimes dangerous dream-world his work has also been the subject of much Freudian analysis, sensitive to holes and fluids, shrinkages and dilations. For

these and yet other reasons the books have attracted copious learned commentary, now brilliantly and entertainingly condensed in Martin Gardner's various versions of *The Annotated Alice*. How, some drier academic might ask, could poor puzzled children possibly take account of all this heavy 'significance'? Let them stick to Harry Potter and Roald Dahl and leave Carroll to the scholars.

That position is, however, reversible – and should be reversed. The two stories, and more especially *Alice in Wonderland*, were specifically told for the delight of particular children. There is no suggestion that Carroll was covertly writing for an older audience. The only adult he perhaps had in mind to please and divert was himself. Two interrelated questions would therefore seem to emerge. What was it about the author and the circumstances of composition that gave rise to this multiplication of meaning and suggestion, and this uncanny foretaste of Modernism? Conversely, what is there in the nature of Modernism, an innately self-conscious and intellectual literary movement, that made it possible for an obscure cleric to produce, as though by accident, two masterpieces in that mode, when his starting-point was simply an attempt to improvise a beguiling tale for three small children?

## I

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, only much later to be known as Lewis Carroll, was born in Cheshire on 27 January 1832. Lutwidge was his mother's maiden name. His father, Charles Dodgson, was curate of Daresbury, a small village seven miles from Warrington. The younger Charles grew up in an isolated parsonage, the third of eleven children, most of them girls, in a close-knit family. His father, a serious, devout and scholarly man – a mathematician – had none the less an agreeable taste for anarchic nonsense.

Once, when travelling to Leeds, he was asked by his eight-year old son to bring him back a file, a screwdriver and a ring. He responded in a letter:

As soon as I get to Leeds I shall scream out in the middle of the street, *Ironmongers – Iron-mongers* [ . . . ]. I *will* have a file & a screwdriver, & a ring, & if they are not brought directly, in forty seconds I will leave nothing but one small cat alive in the whole town of Leeds, & I shall only leave that, because I am afraid I shall not have time to kill it.

Then what a bawling & a tearing of hair there will be! Pigs & babies, camels & butterflies, rolling in the gutter together – old women rushing up the chimneys & cows after them – ducks hiding themselves in coffee-cups, & fat geese trying to squeeze themselves into pencil cases . . .

Here is something of the surrealist extravagance of the *Alice* books. The younger Charles would happily adopt that manic strain – pigs, babies, chimneys and all. His mother, to whom he was devoted, seems to have been an exceptional woman, widely admired and loved. He himself was very much at the centre of family life, writing poems and sketches, performing conjuring tricks and building a marionette theatre for the entertainment of his sisters. Many commentators have darkly speculated as to what went wrong in Dodgson's life, as though his creative work was only to be accounted for by childhood misery or psychological impediment. He did have problems – some deafness in one ear and a nervous stammer – but these seem to have been relatively minor disabilities. The prior question, surely, is what went right. A large part of the answer must be that he had an extremely happy childhood that nurtured his diverse talents, encouraged his natural taste for humour and fantasy, and accustomed him to entertaining small children.

His less happy experiences came later. He seems not greatly to have enjoyed Rugby School, where he was for some years a boarder, perhaps finding it too boisterous and invasive after the security of home. A much worse shock was to come. He went up to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1851, but within days received news of the sudden death of his mother, an event surely traumatic for him, as for the whole family.

At this point, where most biographical sketches would just be getting into their stride, the story of Dodgson, at least in terms of personal drama and external happenings, would almost seem to start winding down. He lived a quiet life as a student, and having prospered sufficiently in his studies was kept on at Christ Church as Mathematical Lecturer. In Oxford he proceeded to remain, a reclusive bachelor don, ordained as a deacon of the Church of England in 1861. His pursuits were largely private ones, reading, writing, photography, games, puzzles, small inventions. What joy there was in his life came chiefly from his friendships with small girls. The claim is no mere guess: Dodgson kept a diary in which he repeatedly recorded as red-letter days – in his own terminology: ‘marked with a white stone’ – those which he had spent with children, escorting them on small expeditions, telling them stories, perhaps taking photographs. He was in his element as an adopted uncle: there is endless evidence that children loved his company. In his professional life as teacher and mathematician he was competent but apparently unremarkable. He became a notable figure only through the fame of the *Alice* books – and these were by ‘Lewis Carroll’, an *alter ego* he was careful to distance from his academic and religious self.

Christ Church was, however, their immediate, if indirect, source. As a young don Dodgson was a photographer of very considerable accomplishment – at a time, of course, when the art was in its infancy, and a camera still a source of

wonder. A by-product of this talent, and a delightful one from Dodgson's point of view, was that it created ready contacts with children. His portraits of small girls were particularly striking and soon attracted attention, oddly combining innocence with unconscious eroticism. What would seem to us a notable ambiguity was presumably less evident to the Victorian eye. Certainly many an Oxford mother would have been only too delighted to see the beauty of a small daughter permanently captured by this brand new art form.

Among the children to whom he thus gained access were those of Henry George Liddell, who had become Dean of Christ Church in 1855. There were four of them, a son, Harry, and three daughters, Lorina, Alice and Edith. With all of them, but most notably with Alice, he struck up an intimate relationship. He photographed them repeatedly, and entertained them with stories, riddles and games. A favourite diversion was a trip along the river in a rowing boat culminating in a picnic. It was on one such trip, on 4 July 1862, that Dodgson improvised the story that was to become *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice was then ten years old. At her own request he wrote it out within a day or two, adding 'fresh ideas', but the finished booklet, entitled *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, and illustrated with the author's own lively drawings, was not presented to her until the Christmas of 1864.

By this time, encouraged by friends who had read the manuscript, Dodgson had already decided to try to publish his story. Further expanded, and with illustrations by the artist and cartoonist John Tenniel, it appeared in 1865 under the new title *Alice in Wonderland*. The author's name was given as 'Lewis Carroll', a pseudonym Dodgson had used before, a reversed version of 'Charles Lutwidge'. His book was an immediate critical and popular success.

Within a year he was contemplating a sequel, but it took

him some years to complete the undertaking. There were also difficulties in finding an illustrator. Tenniel initially refused the commission, and even at the last changed his mind only reluctantly, after several notable artists had turned it down. *Through the Looking-Glass* was eventually published in time for the Christmas market in 1871. Once more 'Lewis Carroll' enjoyed instant acclaim.

Since that time, as Dodgson's biographer Morton N. Cohen points out, neither *Alice* book has ever gone out of print.<sup>1</sup> They have become an international phenomenon, translated into more than seventy languages. Various of the characters have passed into the public consciousness: everyone knows of the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat and the White Knight. Text and illustrations have provided a twin source of metaphor for writers, speech-makers and cartoonists. Many of Dodgson's phrases have become proverbial: 'Curiouser and curiouser'; '*Everybody* has won, and all must have prizes'; 'Off with his head!' His invented verb 'to chortle' has entered the language. Somehow this shy man accomplished infinitely more than he had set out to do. While the forward-looking novelists of his day, post-realists such as Hardy and James, were writing large books in pursuit of new objectives as yet not clearly in view, Carroll implausibly achieved still greater novelty through chancing on an accidental short-cut. If those writers dealt with relationships and emotional intensities on the one hand, yet with 'ideas' and new techniques on the other, so, in his own way, did Carroll.

1 *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*, p. 134. For details, see Bibliography.

## II

Both the Alice books are located in a dream-world. Alice falls asleep and finds herself confronting, and conversing with, transformed elements from her normal life – a mouse, a playing-card, a Frog-Footman, a chess piece, a gnat. The mode produces interesting by-products. For example there is an immense gain in the area of tempo: the books move with exhilarating speed. Exposition is unnecessary since little is explicable, and the absence of ordinary narrative logic means that transitions may be instantaneous. Carroll can cross-cut like a film director. This confusing realm is full of surprises – flowers speak, a caterpillar smokes a hookah, a goat and a beetle travel by train. There is instability everywhere: the Knights fall off their horses, the Cheshire Cat appears and disappears, a baby turns into a pig, the Butterfly is transmogrified into the Bread-and-butter fly. Alice herself repeatedly changes size. Any of the creatures she meets may prove friendly, touchy, patronising or threatening. Her own abilities and feelings are put to unexpected tests. She proceeds warily through this alien world, not knowing the rules by which it operates. Carroll has hit on a whole new sphere of operations for the storyteller. Alice's adventures prepare the ground for those of Bloom and Stephen in the 'Circe' episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or of Kafka's K. in *The Trial*. The transformations she witnesses and experiences point forward to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which famously begins: 'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.'<sup>2</sup>

Carroll also shares with Joyce an obsessive interest in the oddities and limitations and potentialities of the very words

2 *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, Penguin Books, 1961

through which he creates his narrative. The numerous puns in *Alice* books are only the most obvious symptoms of this interest, suddenly swinging disparate ideas into unlikely contiguity. He regularly interrogates what he writes. No sooner has the Mouse said that 'the patriotic Archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable - ' than the Duck interrupts with the awkward question 'Found *what?*' (p. 53) Alice is brought up short when invited to consider what a 'muchness' might be, as in the phrase 'much of a muchness' (p. 97). The Mock Turtle is actually conjured into uncertain existence from a wilful misreading of 'Mock Turtle Soup'. 'Jabberwocky' is an interesting extended exercise in communicative possibilities. At a first reading Alice 'couldn't make it out at all', but reflects ' "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something*: that's clear, at any rate - " ' (p. 169). With Humpty Dumpty's help, however, she makes great strides in comprehension, as does the reader. The explanation that '*slithy*' is 'like a portmanteau' in comprehending the two words 'lithe and slimy' (p. 225) harks forward to a favourite technique of James Joyce. 'Jabberwocky' reminds us that we can apprehend meaning of sorts merely from implied syntactical structures and from verbal association.

Carroll anticipates both Joyce and Eliot in his dense cross-referencing to earlier writings, particularly in verse. What we would now call his 'inter-textuality' works in diverse ways. His various nursery-rhyme characters multiply the surrealistic possibilities, demonstrating that not only Alice's daily doings but also her imaginative life are to be constituent elements in her dream. The *Mother Goose* stories are pre-emptive in that the protagonists move in the shadow of predestination: the Queen of Hearts *will* have her tarts stolen, the Tweedle brothers must inevitably fight, as must the Lion and the Unicorn; Humpty Dumpty is doomed to tumble to destruction. The frequent parodies



that Carroll includes would seem to have a number of functions. Several of the originals were 'improving' works for the young. Carroll's absurdist, blackly humorous transcriptions both mock the pietism concerned and suggest that it was likely to have fallen on deaf ears. But in a peculiar way those very poems achieve a shadowy presence in his text, lurking behind the burlesque versions. Eliot and Joyce, of course, incorporate constant allusions to earlier writings, and Joyce deals generously in parody and pastiche – most obviously in the 'Oxen of the Sun' episode of *Ulysses*. For their more serious purposes both authors assert, as Carroll does, the dependence, positive and negative, of their work on the literature of the past. Nabokov, who as a young man translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian, compounds the complexities with direct references to Carroll. The poem which constitutes the main substance of *Pale Fire* begins with a version of looking-glass penetration. A bird dies when dashed against a pane of glass whose mirror-like surface has seemed to it to be a continuation of the sky:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain  
By the false azure in the window-pane;  
I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I  
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.

The title *Through the Looking-Glass* signals to readers that they should look for reflections of the 'real' world. Post-Modernist texts can offer reflections of a reflection.

### III

The techniques so far mentioned, however, need not have proved more than ingenious verbal or imaginative tricks, discovered before their time. After all Dodgson *liked* such tricks for their own sake. Various of the parodies and devices in the *Alice* books had their origin in earlier