

*Revising Alice in Wonderland:
An Analysis of Alice's Female Subjectivity in Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland*

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Abstract: This essay looks into the subversion of Victorian gender norms in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) taking as a starting point the concepts "the angel in the house" and "the fallen woman" so as to provide an overview of the historical gender conditions of Victorian England. Moreover, I will provide an analysis of the main character, Alice, is provided in order to analyse her female subjectivity and how it departs from the ideal Victorian woman behaviour through a dream-like journey to Wonderland. By doing so, I intent to prove how Alice shows alternative ways to be female and how she can be considered a transgressor as far as gender issues are concerned.

Keywords: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Victorian England, female subjectivity, gender roles.

Resumen:

El trabajo se centra en la subversión de las normas de género de la edad Victoriana en la novela "Alicia en el País de las Maravillas" (1865) de Lewis Carroll. Tomando como punto de partida los conceptos "el ángel del hogar" y "la mujer caída" a fin de proporcionar una visión general de las condiciones de género de la Inglaterra Victoriana. Además, ofreceré un análisis del personaje principal, Alicia, para analizar su subjetividad femenina y cómo ésta se desvía del comportamiento ideal de la mujer Victoriana a través de un viaje onírico al País de las Maravillas. De ésta forma, mi intención es probar como Alicia presenta formas alternativas de ser mujer y las razones por las cuales se la puede considerar una transgresora en lo que concierne a cuestiones de género.

Palabras clave: *Alicia en el País de las Maravillas*, Inglaterra Victoriana, subjetividad femenina, roles de género.

Introduction

This paper is based on two main objectives: to explore the context in which Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) is set in order to understand the gender norms and constraints of the time and to compare those to the actions and behaviour of the main character of the novel, Alice. The analysis of the creation of Wonderland and the reactions that the main character presents in her journey will allow me to prove that she creates a new female subjectivity different from the ideal gender role that is encouraged by Victorian society. The reason why I have chosen this topic is because of my recent interest in Women's Studies as well as my fascination for the main character of the novel since I was very young.

The Victorian Era and gender

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) was a period of time marked by Queen Victoria's reign in England. As my research will focus around gender subjectivity in a novel set in this time period, it is important to pay special attention to the place that women had in the society of Victorian England.

First, one might think that having a woman as the ultimate power authority would imply an improvement for the role that women had in society. However, Queen Victoria was completely against the suffragette movement and "she constantly reiterated her own opposition to women's rights and her firm belief that her sex belonged in its own separate, domestic sphere" (Rappaport 2003, 426). Not only that but she also "regularly made protestations of her sex's inferiority and intellectual inadequacy" (Rappaport 2003, 426). As she was one of the most recognised female figures of England, "Victoria came to be seen as the very model of marital stability and domestic virtue." (Abrams 2001, 1) placing her marital relationship with her husband Albert as a perfect example to follow. According to that prototype of woman, society created delimited categories in which women were classified depending on their behaviour. Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854) is a great representative of the socially accepted demeanour that women were expected to have. In the poem, the poet describes his wife who he believes should be a model for all women. The psychological traits that are encouraged are "passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all –pure" (Ren 2014, 2061). Additionally, he emphasizes women's belonging to the domestic sphere, their basic duty as mothers as well as their complete dependence on their husbands. Nevertheless, stating that this was the only way in which women could act at the time would be a generalisation. Auerbach in her book *The Woman and the Demon: The life of a Victorian Myth* explores the creation of this submissive image that is "defined by her boundaries" (Auerbach 1984, 72) as a response to the fear of women's freedom which would be reminiscent of "the continued existence of old fears concerning Woman's satanic alliances" (Basham 1992, 8) referring to Eve being seduced by the devil in the Bible. Thus, she explores the binaries of the angel and the demon also referred to as "the fallen woman".

The correct manners that had to be followed to stand in the “good” side of society were passed on from a very young age through strict education. There were different types of schools depending on the social class and the wealth of the family. Nevertheless, the values that were passed on and the way in which students developed their intellectual capacities depended on gender. In this period, the memorisation of facts was encouraged; however, the education of women was valued through what they called accomplishments. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, the character of Miss Bingley, a high class accomplished lady, provides a list of what she considers to be essential accomplishments that a woman should have: “a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages . . . she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, tone of her voice” (Austen 2004, 36). Thence, such activities that were taught in schools were the only ones expected to be carried out by women in their free time. The more they practised and became more accomplished, the easier it would be for them to find a wealthy husband, which was the ultimate goal in Victorian society.

In summary, it can be stated that Victorian education made children, precisely young girls, very aware that the strict gaze of society would determine if they would be considered socially acceptable or outcasts depending on the attainment of specific attitudes and behaviours.

Fiction as escapism

A good way to challenge those gender roles in such an oppressive society was through fictional narratives. Adding elements that challenged the strict patriarchal hierarchy in realistic stories could result in censorship or punishment from governmental authorities. In order to avoid that, authors would “create the subversive fantasy of females seeking autonomy and independence by means of the fantastic mode” (Ren 2014, 2061) so as to escape from social sanctions. Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1862 and regardless of being a male author, as the novel is set in this exact time period, it is full of feelings of oppression that women experienced in that era. Those feelings are presented and fought against through the main character of the novel, Alice, and her dreamlike exploration of the menacing Wonderland.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Alice is the seven year old girl protagonist of the novel. She lives in Victorian England and in spite of the fact that her social class is not clearly stated in the novel, her manners and her education hint at her belonging to the middle-class. Consequently, the ideologies of the epoch are evidenced in her manners. As Auerbach exposes: “Alice herself . . . confronting a world out of control by looking for the rules and murmuring her lessons, stands as one image of the Victorian middle-class child.” (Auerbach 1973, 31). Nevertheless, it is through a dream where she falls through a rabbit-hole, reaching a bizarre land called Wonderland that she experiences a self-discovering journey that

affects her Victorian child image. This image is replaced by one of a young lady who finds a new female subjectivity not affected by the society in which she has been raised.

Down the rabbit-hole

In order to analyse the main character's female subjectivity, first, I will analyse her encounters with the creatures that she meets in Wonderland, focusing specifically on the three female characters that appear in the novel (the Duchess, the Cook and the Queen of Hearts). As Auerbach exposes "Wonderland is ruled by potentially murderous women" (Auerbach 1984, 167) so by paying attention to those female figures, I intend to explore the significance of the creation of those in contrast to the prototypical ideal of the Victorian woman that has been presented.

The first female character that Alice comes upon is the Duchess. In spite of the fact that she is first seen with a baby in her arms, shortly the reader notices that she "is far from being content with her role as a mother" (Ren 2014, 2062). She is seen "tossing the baby violently up and down" (Carroll 2012, 50) and singing a lullaby that encapsulates the strict education that children received in the Victorian school system: "Speak roughly to your little boy, / And beat him when he sneezes: / He only does it to annoy, / Because he knows it teases" (Carroll 2012, 50). Not only is she aggressive towards her baby but also when she addresses Alice, who is also considered a child. She is very unwelcoming and rude to the protagonist. In addition, she carelessly asks her to take care of the baby. Once the baby turns into a pig in Alice's arms and runs away never to be seen again, the Duchess never asks for its whereabouts. Instead, her mood seems to have improved, proving thence that "The baby is a burden to her" (Ren 2014, 2062). The representation of the Duchess as an unloving mother is a direct result from the Victorian belief that it was compulsory for women to be socially acceptable to have children. It was an obligation that they were forced to fulfil. Pursuing this further, the fact that Alice "feels "quite relieved" when the baby turns into a pig and disappears into the forest" (Aikens 2010, 29) and does not feel any kind of sympathy for the baby-pig creature may indicate that she does not want to fulfil this duty as a woman later on in her life. More precisely, Alice shows through the character of the Duchess a subversion of the image of the ideal loving mother that Victorian society valued, thence, offering a critique and refusing that role.

The second character who Alice encounters is the Duchess' maid, the Cook. However, she is not the prototypical model of the obedient and fearful maid. On the contrary, "She puts too much pepper deliberately in [the Duchess'] food, annoying her mistress, and causing her to sneeze" (Ren 2014, 2062) and at one point she starts "throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby" (Carroll 2012, 49). In addition, not only does she carry out this kind of rebellious behaviour against her mistress but also against higher authorities such as the King in the final jury scene. This kind of behaviour would be completely unthinkable for a Victorian housemaid as it shows "her courage to defy the authority, and it is an attempt on the part of the lower class to disrupt the oppression/repression binary state in the social structure" (Ren 2014, 2062). In other words, as she is the embodiment of the working-class woman figure, this figure is also being subverted through Alice's mind. This representation points to a critique of the ill-treatment of the lower classes that Alice herself may have witnessed.

Therefore, by giving a voice to this character, she is giving working class Victorian women the chance to rebel back and speak their minds, an opportunity that very few had in that period of time.

The third and last female character in Wonderland is the Queen of Hearts. She represents the ultimate level of authority yet she is represented as the antagonist of the story. She is tyrannical and characterised by her constant threatening of beheading everyone that “refuses to satisfy [her] demands” (Ren 2014, 2062). The fact that Alice creates a powerful female character that deviates so much from the patriarchal society in which she has been raised in is very significant. And even if it is almost impossible not to align her with Queen Victoria, comparing both figures it is clear that the Queen of Hearts is not a good representative of a powerful authority as some believe that Queen Victoria was. The most significant aspect about this character is her marital relationship with her husband. The roles of Victorian society are inverted in this couple where she is the one that makes the decisions whilst he is portrayed as completely dependent, fearful and submissive. As Aihong Ren exposes: “Under her tyranny, the King becomes infantile and weak. His masculinity and dominance are gone” (Ren 2014, 2062) which is very much the opposite of what Victorian England promoted. Some of the dialogues between these characters may seem humorous to the readers yet they are another ironical subversion presented by the main character’s subconscious. To conclude, it is significant the fact that it is only when Alice stands for herself and contradicts the Queen that she gets to return home. She does so not only safely without having had her head cut off but also having learnt to ignore the authorities’ intimidations, that could be applied not only to governmental authorities but also closer to the household such as her mother or maybe even teachers.

Alice’s journey through Wonderland

The way in which Alice navigates Wonderland and how she faces the creatures is vital for her analysis. As it has already been stated, many of the characters that she faces are very subversive as regards the way in which she has been taught that she should behave. Thus, I will analyse the subversive aspects that Alice shows through her own actions and words. Some of them are produced as a result from interaction with other characters and some others are moments of self-realisation that enable her deviation from the Victorian ideal gender role.

Firstly, the creation of Wonderland itself is the first refusal of the aspects that Victorian society encourages. From the very first moment she decides to abandon her sister’s side out of boredom caused by the lady-like accepted activities that she and her sister were supposed to do in their free time. Alternatively, she decides to follow a white rabbit that has caught her attention, the first act of rebellion that will lead to many more. Once she embarks on this journey, one has to notice how she is not on a quest to return home even “though she does admit when stuck in the White Rabbit’s house that her own home is “pleasanter” than Wonderland” (Aikens 2010, 31). Her only aim is to explore the unknown place and to reach the place that has tickled her curiosity the most, the Queen’s garden. Furthermore, as it has been mentioned previously, the creation of this

mushroom filled, carnivalesque-like land as well as creatures that inhabit it are Alice's mechanism to escape the behavioural repression of Victorian society.

An argument that is sometimes used so as to invalidate Alice's subversion of Victorian manners is the lack of control in the creation of her own world. However, one of the most significant parts of the novel for Alice's development is the well-known "tea party" episode, in "A Mad Tea-Party, chapter VII, when Alice encounters the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Hatter. Not only does she ignore the rules of proper behaviour that she has been taught when ignoring them when they scream "No room! No Room!" (Carroll 2012, 56) at her when they see her approaching the table. But the most important aspect of this encounter that shapes Alice's character is created by her reaction to the Hatter. Since the very first moment, the Hatter, as a male adult, acts in a way in which Alice is not used to, making "personal remarks" (Carroll 2012, 57) when he points out how her "hair wants cutting" (Carroll 2012, 56), asking her to solve riddles that have no answer or defying the naturalistic concept of time by proposing that it is always six o' clock. Hence, the fact that she decides not to put up with Hatter's rudeness and instead, walks out of the scene thinking that "This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear" (Carroll 2012, 63). Therefore, "the dainty child carries the threatening kingdom of Wonderland within her" (Auerbach 1973, 32) but as "she becomes an independent thinker and vigorously argues for her own rights, decisions" (Raszková 2011, 36) it is in the way in which she faces such a treacherous world that she displays her control mastery.

Another consequence of Alice's dream journey is the questioning of the education that she has received. After facing various creatures and their eccentric unusual behaviour, she starts questioning her own. Before falling down the rabbit-hole, she is very conscious and proud of her expertise because of how valuable knowledge was in Victorian society. Nevertheless, it is challenging for her to apply the facts that she has so thoroughly memorised to the real world since they do not have much use for problem-solving and everyday situations. That is the main reason why the character often comes off as obnoxious since she is constantly trying to "to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge" (Carroll 2012, 50). However, it is throughout her exploration of the realm that she realises that if she wants to achieve her goals. She has to replace all of her memorised rules with the need to satisfy her curious needs. One clear example is exposed in chapter VI "Pig and Pepper", when Alice wants to enter the Duchess' house but the people inside do not hear her knocking on the door. It is not until Alice realises that her polished manners do not work that she does not fail to comply with the polite behaviour that society considered essential. Even if it still resonates in her mind all the time, as the narrator points out "she was not quite sure whether it was good manners for her to speak first" (Carroll 2012, 49), it is her curiosity what makes her act and keep on exploring that dangerous place. So when analysing Alice's knowledge and curiosity, one can see that it goes against the traditional "fear of a woman acquiring knowledge, particularly as a threat to patriarchy" (Aikens 2010, 29) as she is not punished for being curious and ignoring her manners to satisfy her curiosity by eating unknown food or entering places where she has not been formally invited, instead "she is never truly punished" (Aikens 2010, 29). The novel has often been considered a celebration of curiosity because of how Carroll aligns that concept with connotations of "triumph and praise" (Forss 2013, 18).

The return to her sister's side once Alice wakes up has often been considered one of the reasons why her behaviour cannot be considered subversive as regards gender norms. Some critics see it as a return to the role that society has for her. However, once Alice tells her sister about her dream, her sister "imagines a grown Alice surrounded by children, she's telling stories of Wonderland—thus privileging Alice's imaginative storytelling over a traditional maternal image" (Aikens 2010, 29), in that way she would not comply to that Victorian ideal. Aikens supports this argument by using the metaphor of Alice growing in size in the house, she argues that this symbolizes that "Her ideas are too big for the domestic sphere" (Aikens 2010, 29). Alice's sister is portrayed as fearful and passive, this kind of attitude leads to her being "never rewarded with the opportunity to experience Wonderland, which serves as a representation of the . . . opportunity that lies before women willing to break the chains of patriarchal rule" (Brink 2014, 5). The fact that Alice abandons this subversive dream-dimension does not imply her acceptance of the Victorian "angel of the house" model as she is not portrayed "the type of girl who dreams about keeping house for her future husband or cleans up the dirty dishes at the mad tea party" (Aikens 2010, 29). Alternatively, she is granted the possibility to make her own life choices after what she has learnt in Wonderland. She is given a sense of "newfound independence, liberation, and the ability to actively choose her own direction in life" (Brink 2014, 5) which will be very useful despite of the fact that she belongs to a non-accepting society. This experience will make her become the woman that she wants to be, not the woman that society wants her to be.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be stated that Alice can be considered a transgressor of the gender norms that Victorian England imposed. She deviates from those gender norms by creating a complete new world that she explores facing many hostilities such as food that alters her size or unwelcoming creatures. My original idea for this paper was to reflect and consider if she could be labelled as a female heroine. However, after finishing this essay, I realised that there is no need to search for the male hero pattern that fantasy usually provides in Carroll's story. Instead, the reader gets this disobedient child who manages not only to survive this dangerous adventure but also to learn and become a woman with a new sense of her own subjectivity. A female subjectivity that refuses ideas of marriage and oppression and instead teaches us that "we can chase something interesting, barge in where we're not invited, try new things, observe strange phenomena, ask too many questions, argue with authority figures, tell stories, and wander far from home without worrying how to get back" (Aikens 2010, 31). To conclude, I would like to end this essay with the following quote, which states my thoughts entirely "One of the reasons the original *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is so special is that it represents alternative ways to be female" (Aikens 2010, 31), alternative ways that have inspired and will continue to inspire many other women (and men) around the world to be a bit more "Alice" in our daily lives.

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