

L in Wonderland¹

By causticsoda

*“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.
“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”(60)*

Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland is by all means a strange construction, which may properly be called *nonsense*. Characters and circumstances have a peculiar way of changing size and shape, disappearing, and reappearing on a frequent basis – sometimes entirely, sometimes in pieces, and sometimes by potion, but always completely irrespective of causal obligation. Several key figures, most notably the renowned Mock Turtle, arise solely due to ingenious abuses of the English language. Alice’s own actions do not in general have significant consequences other than taking her and the reader to the *next* bizarre situation, since there are no substantial notions of love, death, conflict, or religion, and absolutely no ethical framework. Indeed, all of the plot forces that would shape a ‘normal’ story are as hollow here as the Queen of Hearts’ constant execution orders, or the fight between the Lion and the Unicorn. As a result, there is little scope for moral or edifying content – instead, two times five is twelve, London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* are like traditional children’s stories in a few respects, but the customary reference frames are completely ripped off the hinges.

¹ Alice **Liddel**. Of course, **L** can stand for any number of things...

NOTE: All references from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through The Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, unless mentioned otherwise

The books do not lend themselves easily to grand, universal interpretations or symbolisms. Certain Victorian sensibilities are mocked – the constant and superficial stress on manners, for instance, which reaches its absurd apex at the Queen’s banquet in *Looking Glass*: ‘Alice – Mutton; Mutton – Alice...’(232) – but such themes are at best scattered and secondary. The essence of Wonderland lies in nonsense, and remarkably, Carroll uses it both to create humor and pleasure, as well as to make some very non-trivial points about language, logic, and ultimately, about identity. He does this by creating a suspension of disbelief which is exceptionally strong due to his adept channeling of both the content and the form of the story. In Wonderland, language and reality become one and the same thing, and by showing the arbitrary nature of one through artful word-play and puns, Carroll makes a strong implicit statement about the value of the other.

To begin with, we observe that very fabric of Wonderland – its absurd humor, its bizarre conversations, its fantasy-like episodes – arises in Carroll’s games with language and logic. The foundation on which these games stand is simple: the meaning of a word depends heavily on its context – that is, roughly, on the meanings of words surrounding it – so that the word has no inherent denotation in and of itself, but only *with respect* to certain other words. Carroll elevates both the reader and Alice further and further away from the plane of ‘reality’ by destroying any initial context or frame of reference through the careful use of *puns*. A pun is like a loophole in language – it can move quickly from one context to another in the span of a slight change in pronunciation or spelling. By combining puns with inherent linguistic ambiguities, as well as with logical

riddles and puzzles, Carroll is able to successfully transcend context, and bend language into a dream-like nonsense without breaking any of its rules.

The technique is apparent as soon as Alice tumbles into the infamous rabbit-hole – with the unsettled ‘Do cats eat bats? Do bats eat cats?’ (13) question, and Alice’s confusion between a bottle *not labeled* ‘poison’ and one labeled ‘not poison’ (15), which exploits the ease of misrepresenting the logical negative. In the episode of the *Caucus-Race*, the Mouse tries to dry everyone with a rather ‘dry’ history of England, to which further confusion is added by the stylistic use of pronouns without explicitly stating what they refer to:

...the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable--"
`Found *what?*' said the Duck.
`Found *it,*' the Mouse replied rather crossly: `of course you know what "it" means.'
`I know what "it" means well enough, when I find a thing,' said the Duck: `it's generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?' (27)

The Mouse’s Tail that follows is a most explicit mixture of content and form – the *tale* of why he hates ‘C and D’ (30) is laid out on the page to look like a *tail*, which Alice is magically able to see and refer to, almost as if she were looking at the page:

`I beg your pardon,' said Alice very humbly: `you had got to the fifth bend, I think?'
`I had *not!*' cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily.
`A knot!' said Alice,... (32)

This is a distinct example of how important context is, and how puns manage to slip through the cracks so that different contexts melt into each other. Observe that while it is common, in any story, for a reader to assume the role of a character, Carroll has managed to do the reverse – Alice has, in some capacity, assumed the role of the *reader*, who is reading the book *Alice in Wonderland*,

which she is in. This blurs the distinction between our reality and Alice's in a stunning, circular manner.

The effect of such distortions in expression and context is only enhanced by complementary distortions in content. In the first four chapters of *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice changes size no less than five times – twice by potions labeled 'DRINK ME', once by a currant cake labeled 'EAT ME', once by a fan, and once by pebbles that turn into (unlabeled) cakes. The changes occur specifically when she needs to go through a door that is too small, reach a table that is too high, and so on – adapted to whatever her current thoughts and desires may be – but it is all done transparently. It is worth noting that such convenience is characteristic of Wonderland – Alice never outgrows her surroundings or disappears, after the caucus-race there are exactly enough comfits to go around, etc. etc. Indeed, it seems at times that Alice is guiding the very story that she is part of – and we shall see that this is a big part of the effect Carroll is trying to produce.

Although she is initially startled and disoriented by them, Alice grows accustomed to the transformations as time goes by – as is apparent from the loss of labels, and her eventual *expectation* of things to eat and drink to cause shrinkage or growth:

`If I eat one of these cakes,' she thought, `it's sure to make *some* change in my size; and as it can't possibly make me larger, it must make me smaller, I suppose.' (40)

It is clear that by this point, Alice is well-versed in the [il]logic of Wonderland – and this gives her a degree of *control* over it. She is able to react to unreasonable situations in a reasonable manner, by learning the evolving rules of Wonderland. By the time Alice reaches the caterpillar with its universal mushroom, size is no

longer an issue, and neither she nor the reader pays much attention to it for the remainder of *Adventures* or *Looking Glass*, although it continues to have an effect. It is Carroll's incremental, continuous, and above all *natural* progression that suspends us in this absurd reality. By orienting Alice in a bizarre, nonsensical world, Carroll manages to sufficiently *disorient* the reader from a fixed reality, in preparation for what lies ahead.

Alice's physical transformations are accompanied by perhaps even more alarming transformations in her mind and memory. In her initial lack of bearing, she gropes for identity by trying to remember her lessons, and discovers that the entire substratum of her mind has moved – it seems as if her memories are *structurally* intact, but the language is altered as if her mental coordinate system has been rotated or translated. For instance, her multiplication tables are muddled – well, not quite, there is a pattern: starting at 18, the base of the number system is increased by 3 with each multiplication, perhaps as a mathematician's inside joke (38, *The Annotated Alice*) – and the lyrics to some standard English rhymes that she knows have turned rather exotic ('And pour the waters of the Nile / On every golden scale! (21)). This is not forgetting in the usual sense – rather, it is reflective of the displacement or even the absence of context in which Alice finds herself, so that words in her memory from the 'real' world lose their bearing, and hence their conventional 'meaning', in Wonderland.

Through the course of the story, we are introduced to new characters that rely ever more heavily on language tricks, and contribute further to the displacement of context. The conversations with the Cheshire Cat are logical oases, but range from common sense:

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.
'I don't much care where--' said Alice.
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat. (60)

to utterly ridiculous non-sequiturs:

'To begin with,' said the Cat, 'a dog's not mad. You grant that?'
'I suppose so,' said Alice.
'Well, then,' the Cat went on, 'you see, a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.' (61)

The Mad Tea party is especially rich in tricks – from the Hatter's *murder* of the Time, to the Dormouse's sleeping habits, to 'drawing treacle from a well' – as is the Mock Turtle's exposition of his schooling days, with Washing, Drawling, Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, Derision, and Mystery taught by none other than a turtle named *Tortoise*. All of the main characters in both these episodes owe their existence to expressions in the English language ('Mad as a Hatter', 'Mock Turtle Soup') – the Dormouse to French, perhaps ('Dormir') – blurring the distinction between language and reality in Wonderland, and signifying further the arbitrary allocation of meaning to words, and of words to objects.

Without any reference point – physical, mental, or 'linguistic' – Alice is unable to place her own identity. She cannot measure herself, because there is nothing fixed to measure herself by – not even her memories. This situation parallels the metacircular reliance of words on each other for definition: meaning does not exist anywhere, but only in the relationships between meaningless things. Carroll is hinting that identity is the same way, that it exists only in reference to qualities defined in terms of the identities of other people and objects. In this respect, the caterpillar scene is crucial:

`Who are *you*?' said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, `I--I hardly know, sir, just at present-- at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'

`What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. `Explain yourself!'

`I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir' said Alice, `because I'm not myself, you see.' (45)

Alice is unable to justify that she is the same person, because she is not able to articulate what she is the same with respect to. Her identity is logically *dependent* on something outside of it. This point is reasserted immediately after the conversation, when Alice grows above the trees by consuming too much mushroom and encounters a Pigeon, who calls her a serpent due to her long neck and admitted consumption of eggs:

...`but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'

`I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon; `but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say.' (52)

Things are defined in terms of their properties. As Wittgenstein put it, one cannot say what things are, but only how things are. Yet, *what* things are remains important – and at the moment, Alice is not sure what she is, because *how* she is has changed considerably. On one hand, her acceptance of a nonexistent or continuously shifting context allows her to navigate Wonderland with some success. On the other, it makes her forget who she is. Though it is realized fully only in *Looking Glass*, this is the punch-line of both books.

The single most important scene in *Looking Glass*, which ties many of the above concepts together, is Alice's short walk through the looking-glass wood. This episode is easy to miss, since it is less than two pages long with one illustration, and part of a dense chapter that is packed with both humor and meaning. The defining feature of this wood is that in it there are no names:

Well, at any rate it's a great comfort,' she said as she stepped under the trees, 'after being so hot, to get into the -- into *WHAT?*' she went on, rather surprised at not being able to think of the word. 'I mean to get under the -- under the -- under *THIS*, you know!' putting her hand on the trunk of the tree. 'What *DOES* it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it's got no name -- why, to be sure it hasn't!'(156)

The wood represents an uninterpreted, unnamed universe that is devoid of language, context, and denotation. There is, of course, a difficulty in navigating this wood, since there are no placeholders by which one can articulate one's thoughts about it – but this very property makes it *immune* to the shifts in context, meaning, and identity that plague Alice in the *rest* of Wonderland. The wood is a symbol of the 'empty context'.

The problem of object identity is ubiquitous in Wonderland, and closely related to the semantics of the wood. Consider the Wonderland versions of several 'real-world' concepts: is croquet played with flamingos and porcupines still croquet? Is the caucus-race to be considered a race? The commonsense answer to the first question is probably yes, while that to the second is uncertain, but the real issue raised in both cases is the same: what degree of change can an object withstand, while still remaining the same object? Do objects have an intrinsic nature independent of context? There does not appear to be logical motivation for either claim. But in the nameless wood, such questions do not arise. Nothing imprecise is said, because nothing definitive is said at all – the sense of all propositions is completely relative. In considering this, we see that in language, the act of denotation, of *definition*, is powerful, but it is also binding, imprecise, and incomplete. It is truly remarkable that Carroll is able to demonstrate this with such clarity in a children's tale.

Through the Looking Glass strengthens the idea of Wonderland that is developed in *Alice's Adventures*. The flavor and traditions of the first book are preserved, but Carroll delivers linguistic absurdities in more explicit and concentrated doses this time. The use of phonetics is especially heavy and clever – as seen in the ‘bough-wough tree’(139), the names Haigha and Hatta, and of course the *Jabberwocky* and Humpty Dumpty’s ‘explanation’. What really sets *Looking Glass* apart, however, is the transparency it creates between the language of Wonderland, the ‘reality’ of Wonderland, and this time also the reality of the author (i.e. Carroll himself) and the reader. Certain characters, most notably the gnat in the train (who seems to represent Carroll himself) seem to be simultaneously conscious at all three levels:

‘It sounds like a horse,’ Alice thought to herself. And an extremely small voice, close to her ear, said, ‘You might make a joke on that -- something about "horse" and "hoarse," you know.’ ...
Then a very gentle voice in the distance said, ‘She must be labelled "Lass, with care," you know -- ’ ...
Well, if she said "Miss," and didn't say anything more,’ the Gnat remarked, ‘of course you'd miss your lessons. That's a joke. I wish *YOU* had made it.’ (150)

Here, the gnat is actually *telling* Alice to make a pun, to consciously participate in the construction of the Wonderland she is in. In another episode, Humpty Dumpty declares:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.’
‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you CAN make words mean so many different things.’
‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master -- that's all.’ (188)

It is of great importance that the residents of Wonderland are *aware* of the empty nature of words, and use it to their advantage. It is only in a nonsensical world

that characters can play freely with the stuff of which they are made – in this case language.

The success of our analogy between words and identity depends on Carroll's nonsense being well-formed, and on Wonderland respecting the *structural* integrity of language. On examination, we find that almost all of it arises as a result of shifting and mixing contexts by way of puns – by bending language instead of breaking it. The sense of a statement can be taken away either by using malformed expressions, or by placing grammatically correct constructions in an inappropriate context – and Carroll does not even once resort to the former (as opposed to certain poets, such as T. S. Eliot in *The Wasteland*, who use nebulous strings of images to effect reactions). Most of the apparent distortions of logic – such as the frequent reference to vacuous 'objects' (A flame after it has been blown out, an offer of non-existent wine, a riddle without an answer, passing 'nobody' on the road (199)), the use and abuse of inversion (Tweedledee and Tweedledum, a hill so tall that it makes *this* one look like a valley (142)), and the characterization of infinite sets ('they drew all manner of things – everything that begins with an M' (71)) – are quite harmless, and lead to bizarre and brilliant humor. The denizens of Wonderland are ridiculous not due to a lack of logic, but due to the absence of *fixed* axioms to serve as the input to that logic.

In nonsense, Carroll finds the perfect medium to make statements about the nature of *sense*. For something to make sense, it needs a fixed reference point, a context, but nonsense stands completely on its own. The big picture is that identity, like language, is both powerful and restricting. Denotation is

effective, and necessary in a practical sense – without it one cannot navigate the nameless wood – but it is also arbitrary, and this makes it at best relative, transient, and imprecise. Consequently, names are also arbitrary, and there is no logical necessity for an intrinsic identity within the framework of language. Indeed, the same can be said of sanity – Alice’s sanity is relative and even flexible, since it relies on what ‘makes sense’ in Wonderland, but the reader’s *own* sanity seems to depend on it. Through Wonderland, Carroll is able to map such philosophical arguments into the sphere of Alice’s reality, and ultimately, into the reader’s reality. Its serious side lies in that it is a vehicle for demonstrating the problems that arise from the arbitrary nature of denotation, and its playful side exploits that same denotation in artful ways.