

Holding a Mirror to the *Looking Glass*

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When Lewis Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865, the critics had no idea how to cope with such a book. One critic doubted whether “any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stiff, over-wrought story,”¹⁾ and another critic, trying a little harder to relate *Wonderland* to other children’s books he was more accustomed to, claimed that it was “a very elegant piece of fancy-work wrought by a clever brain for the amusement and even instruction of children.”²⁾ That the book was written for the amusement of children (and possibly adults) can hardly be doubted; that Carroll might have intended it for instruction is unlikely. In fact, the Alice books, *Looking Glass* specifically, satirize the classic children’s literature of the time, creating an anti-norm and provoking laughter.

Geoffrey Summerfield, in his book *Fantasy and Reason: Children’s Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, explores the influences of previous literature, including Coleridge, on nineteenth-century children’s literature. Summerfield does this by tracing the progress of children’s literature through the eighteenth century, discussing it as if it were in two camps: those who praised the imagination and those who condemned it. Those who valued the imagination revelled in fairy tales, while those who denied it wrote “chapbooks,” realistically styled small books set in modern times, intended to convey factual information. These books were didactic. Gillian Avery, in his two essays “Fairy Tales with a Purpose” and “Fairy Tales for Pleasure,” describes the state of literature for children at the time the Alice books were released.³⁾ Before Carroll’s Alice books, most literature for children in the 1800’s consisted of fairy tales, “instructive fiction,” and factual treatises styled for a child’s reading level. By “instructive fiction” I refer to the didactic tradition wherein an author uses fiction in an attempt

to increase the reader's moral stature, to lead him/her to religion, or at least to give him/her the benefit of a conscience. Even the fairy tales of the period frequently had a didactic purpose. Avery describes many of the books of the mid-1800s:

All these early fairy tales have a strongly moral and didactic slant. None of the writers hesitates to use the conventions of fairyland for the purpose of teaching some useful lesson. The story in *Holiday House* tells how lazy Master No-Book prefers the Kingdom of Fairy Do-Nothing till he is caught by Giant Snap-'em-up, and eventually rescued by Fairy Teach-all, whom he should have preferred from the beginning. In *The Hope of the Katzekopfs*, Fairy Abracadabra, the wicked imp Selbst and the grave old man Discipline together teach the spoiled prince, Eigenwillig, the need for self-discipline. *The Silver Swan* is about a Teutonic innkeeper who gains possession of two magic caps, one which produces gold and silver coins, and one the cap of wisdom, illustrating the lesson that wisdom, not riches, is the real source of happiness. In *The Enchanted Doll*, the Fairy Malice encourages a toy-maker's jealousy of his industrious neighbour, until he is as detestable as she; while in *The Fairy Godmothers*, Mrs. Gatty argues that love of employment is the best fairy gift. *The Talking Bird* provides a more unusual lesson. The little heroine has to learn the dangers of trying to know the future.⁴⁾

Donald Rackin says that two of the chief writers of this genre, Mrs. Trimmer and Mrs. Barbauld, "endeavored to stuff their young audiences with assorted, unrelated, dry factual knowledge; and to this they added a heavy measure of their own brand of self-righteous, priggish, misguided morality."⁵⁾ These stories were invariably maudlin, and occasionally horrifically violent. One of these two women's followers was Mary Martha Sherwood. Rackin describes her typical output:

Much that Mrs. Sherwood wrote (whether for children or for adults) revolved around religious didacticism; this is especially evident in her so-called novels, where the demands of fiction are rigidly subordinated to those of moral edification. Thus, in *The Fairchild Family* each episode is aimed at teaching a specific lesson (for example, a typical chapter title is "Fatal Effects of Disobedience to Parents") and each is concluded by an appropriate child's prayer or hymn (or both). One sample should suffice. At the end of a gruesome short story on the effects of quarreling between brothers--where for an object lesson Mr. Fairchild has shown the children the rotting corpse of a fratricide hanging upon a gibbet--the hymn reads:

Whatever brawls disturb the street

There should be peace at home; Where sisters dwell and brothers meet,

Quarrels should never come.

Birds in their little nests agree;

And'tis a shameful sight,

When children of one family

Fall out, and chide, and fight.⁶⁾

These books also tended to show a lurid, grotesque view of death.

When they came to the door, they perceived a kind of disagreeable smell, such as they never had smelt before: this was the smell of the corpse, which, having been dead now nearly two days, had begun to corrupt; and as the children went higher up the stairs, they perceived this smell more disagreeably. . . . They all three stood looking on the corpse for a long time, without speaking one word. At last Mr. Fairchild said, "My dear children, you now see what death is: this poor body is going fast to corruption. The soul, I trust, is with God; and my reason for this hope is, that the poor man, when living, was a follower of the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, his Re-

deemer; but such are the taint and corruption of the flesh, by reason of sin, that it must pass through the grave, and crumble to dust."⁷⁾

The Alice books were novel when they first came out:

they didn't fit into any of the previous categories for children's literature. They were obviously not books of facts and information, nor were they moralistic; in fact, they spoofed moralism and didacticism. They did this, however, so gently that no one suffered excessively at Carroll's hands.

The question of whether or not the Alice books fit into the remaining genre, fairy stories, is trickier. It is certain that Carroll, at least in an off-handed fashion, considered *Wonderland* to be a fairy tale. In his diary, he noted, "On [a particular] occasion I told them the fairy-tale of *Alice's Adventures Underground*, which I undertook to write out for Alice, and which is now finished (as to the text) though the pictures are not yet nearly done."⁸⁾ But just because Carroll considered it a fairy tale does not necessarily mean it is a fairy tale. Just as Milton may be in Satan's camp and not know it, so may Carroll be mistaken about the genre of his work. But is he mistaken? A denotative definition, with the exception of one element, seems broad enough to allow *Wonderland* and *Looking Glass* to be fairy tales, as the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* shows when it defines fairy tales as

[N]arratives, set in the distant past, of events that would be impossible in the real world. They often include magical happenings and the appearance of FAIRIES [sic], but the supernatural does not always feature in them, and the heroes and heroines are usually mortal human beings. Such creatures as GIANTS, DWARFS, WITCHES, and OGRES frequently play a part, as well as talking animals. The term *contes des fees* was adopted as a description of such stories in France at the end of the 17th cent., and the English translations of the French *contes* of this period introduce the ex-

pressions 'fairy tale' and 'fairy story' into the English language.⁹⁾

Except for the fact that they aren't set in the distant past, Carroll's works seem to be fairy tales, falling into an accepted genre for children in the Victorian period. In fact, fairy tales were almost the only expression of the fantasy genre for children (I will discuss a few exceptions later). However, the Alice books actually are not fairy tales because they differ in tone and plot from the norm.

Vladimir Propp, in his book *The Morphology of the Folk Tale*, explains the process whereby he examined nearly three hundred fairy tales and found the common themes and plot elements. His work is too extensive to give in depth here, but I can summarize some of the key points: the folk tale (or fairy tale) begins with an external problem (or complication) that brings a hero into action. There is a deceitful, destructive villain (dragon, witch, evil king, etc.) who motivates the action. Various donors (willing or not) provide the hero with whatever items or powers he needs to accomplish his task. The story builds to a struggle between the hero and the villain, ending (most often) in the villain's defeat and the accomplishment of the hero's purpose. Frequently, some form of punishment is applied, either to the villain or to a foolish hero. Finally, a resolution of the story follows, ending the tale either with a marriage or, in less pleasant tales, death.¹⁰⁾

This list of common characteristics is not complete, but it does show how different the Alice books are from the classic fairy tales. There is no problem that draws Alice into the story. There is the fall down the hole in *Wonderland*, but Propp refers to an external problem that *motivates* the hero, e.g., Little Red Riding Hood must take a basket of goodies through the dark forest to her grandmother, or the king announces a ball which all eligible young women are to attend and meet the prince, or one year a drought comes and all the crops in the kingdom wither, prompting the hero to set out and seek his fortune. Another problem is that the Alice books lack a real villain. The Queen of Hearts, in *Wonderland*,

rants and raves and threatens death, but she is little more than a very bad-tempered child at her own party: no one is ever actually beheaded, and though all the members of the court seem afraid of her, there really seems to be no cause for fear. The Red Queen, in *Looking Glass*, might appear, by the structure of the story, to be the antagonist, since she is on the opposing side of Alice in the game of chess they are all elements of, yet the game of chess that they live is hardly more than a formalized ritual. In *Looking Glass* land, the game of chess is just that--a game; rather than living their lives, the chess pieces play at them. This leaves the Red Queen, in her didactic, acerbic fashion, actually helpful to Alice as she explains the rules.

Just as there are no real villains, there are no real donors in the stories. There are characters who lecture and give advice (freely), but they rarely, if ever, tell or give Alice anything useful. The White Knight claims to escort Alice to the eighth square, but in actuality he needs her help far more than she needs his. The only possible exception to this rule is the caterpillar, and he tells her about the growth-controlling mushroom almost as an aside as he leaves. There is also no struggle to resolve a problem--at the end of *Wonderland*, Alice realizes that the court is only a deck of cards, in other words, inconsequential, and in *Looking Glass*, the same sort of thing happens when Alice shakes the Red Queen into a kitten as Alice wakes up. Since there is no actual struggle, there is no resolution. No one is married, no one dies, and at the end of *Looking Glass*, Alice even speculates upon reality when she wonders whether or not she is a fictional character. The closest thing to a resolution ceremony in *Looking Glass*, Alice's coronation as she reaches the eighth square and becomes a queen, is a chaotic shambles which Alice disrupts by waking up. All in all, while the Alice books share some features with fairy tales, they are different in tone and thrust, lacking most of the major plot elements of a fairy story.

Though Carroll's books break from the fairy tale tradition, in

all fairness I must point out that some earlier writers had begun similar experiments. For example, Dickens, in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), draws on another genre of folk-fantasy, the ghost story, rather than on the fairy tale. Dickens, though, still presents a standard conversion story, a moralistic presentation of a character's change from bad to good and the joy he reaps therefrom. Another who changed the classic fairy tale formula for his readers was George MacDonald, a writer better known for the power of his imagination than for his writing. While he wrote some classic fairy stories (*The Princess and the Goblin* [1872] for one), he also wrote *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), which is not quite a fairy story. MacDonald chose to give it a contemporary setting, making it more like a chapbook than a fairy tale. It is about a little boy named Diamond who is the son of a cab driver in London. A quiet, serious, other-worldly sort of boy, he is befriended by the North Wind, an overwhelming sort of mother figure who takes him, riding on her back, on trips as she performs her duties as the wind. The book has several picaresque elements, giving it a rambling structure. It also lacks many of the plot elements of standard fairy tales, i.e., it has no donors, no precipitating problem, no villain, no struggle, etc. In fact, the only fantastic elements in the story are the character of the North Wind and the land to which she takes Diamond, the hero, at the mid-point of the book.

The other writer that deserves mention at this point is Charles Kingsley and his book *The Water Babies* (1863). This book, too, broke established norms. As Humphrey Carpenter points out,

Nobody had ever before dared to mix together a fairy tale--and a completely invented one at that: there was nothing about water-babies in Grimm or Perrault or anyone else--with a touch of social comment about conditions of the working poor, a lot of specialist information about the habits of underwater creatures, and an almost Dantean account of a soul's moral and spiritual education in

purgatory; for Tom's experiences were quite clearly supposed to be those of a soul after death. To top it all, Kingsley had the nerve, as one reviewer spotted, to write the book chiefly in the style of Rabelais.¹¹⁾

All of the books mentioned borrowed extensively from the didactic tradition of the literature before them. That these three writers have also managed to write fantasy, yet managed to avoid producing standard fairy tales, in no way lessens Carroll's achievement. It merely shows Carroll as, at his time, the latest of a general trend, indeed its culmination. As Donald Rackin points out,

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is not so much the beginning of a revolt as it is the final flowering of a long development in children's books--a gradual movement toward stimulating, imaginative, completely undidactic stories for the young. . . . *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is, therefore, part of a movement in children's literature that reaches back as far as the English Romantics, back perhaps to Rousseau.¹²⁾

Not only does Carroll's work avoid didacticism, as Rackin points out; it makes fun of didacticism. In fact, while swinging away from the classic fairy tale, the Alice books manage several satirical shots at the other chief form of children's literature, the moral tales of the time. The Alice books deviate from the standard in quite a few ways: they spoof didacticism, they are not designed to educate (in fact, the education that appears in them is comically specious, for the most part), and they provide no moral instruction. This lack of moral instruction is both an important point and a bit of an understatement. The universe of the two books, rather than being Christian, is, by implication, pagan and purposeless. It is a world where God, order, and even death break down and are either made fun of or ignored completely.

The first point I must deal with is the way Carroll satirizes the didactic tradition of the children's literature preceding him. He does this straightforwardly by creating characters who are only too eager to lecture Alice on any number of moral, social, and scientific issues. The Duchess in *Wonderland* is notorious for her proclivity for drawing morals from every element of conversation. She tells Alice, "Tut, tut, child!... Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it" (W, p. 70). She is full of phrases like, "Oh, tis love, tis love that makes the world go Yound," "Birds of a feather flock together," and "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves" (W, pp. 70-71). She becomes a pointed reference to the didactic tradition in her exchange with Alice:

"Oh, don't talk about trouble!" said the Duchess. "I make you a present of everything I've said as yet."

"A cheap sort of present," thought Alice. "I'm glad people don't give birthday presents like that." (W, p. 72)

The character in *Looking Glass* that best seems to represent the didactic tradition is the Red Queen. The flowers describe her as having spikes (LG, p. 123). It is she who tells Alice such things as, "Look up, speak nicely, and don't twiddle your fingers all the time," "Curtsey while you're thinking what to say. It saves time," and "Speak in French when you ca'n't [sic] think of the English for a thing--turn out your toes as you walk--and remember who you are" (LG, pp. 124-28). She keeps track of when things happen between her and Alice and chides her when Alice fails to keep on schedule: "'It's time for you to answer now,' the Queen said, looking at her watch: 'open your mouth a *little* wider when you speak, and always say, 'your Majesty'''" (LG, p. 124), and "you should have said, ... 'It's extremely kind of you to tell me all this'--however, we'll suppose it said" (LG, p. 128).

In addition to social and moral didacticism, the Alice books manage to mock the educational purpose of many writers. The

educators in *Looking Glass* are all pedants. Humpty Dumpty's theory that words should mean only what the speaker wants them to mean seems quite normal until he takes it to such an illogical extreme that Alice requires an extended explanation at the end of several of his statements:

“. . . There's glory for you!”

“I don't know what you mean by “glory,”” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “of course you don't--till I tell you! I meant, ‘there's a nice knock-down argument for you!”

“But ‘glory’ doesn't mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“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!” (LG, p. 163)

Humpty Dumpty is at least as supercilious as the Red Queen, and he also shows his poetic sense to be pedantic and slow. Patricia Spacks discusses this when she notes that Humpty Dumpty's interpretation of the poem, “Jabberwocky,” consists of

reducing the splendid stanza to an account of animals resembling badgers, lizards, and corkscrews, going through various gyrations in the plot of land around a sundial during the part of the afternoon when one begins broiling things for dinner. . . . One can hardly think of these grotesque animals and their sundial while appreciating the masterful narrative poetry of “Jabberwocky”: it is an interpretation forgotten as soon as it is read. Surely, the filling of the head with cloudy ideas is a higher poetic achievement than the reduction of these ideas to the ridiculous.¹³⁾

Spacks further points out that Humpty Dumpty's own poem is unimaginative and obscure, without even the benefit of creating vague

feelings in the reader:

I sent a message to the fish:
I told them "This is what I wish."
The little fishes of the sea,
They sent an answer back to me.
The little fishes' answer was
"We cannot do it, Sir, because....."
I sent to them again to say,
"It will be better to obey."
The fishes answered, with a grin,
"Why, what a temper you are in!" (LG, pp. 166-167)

The White Knight also tries to educate Alice on the art of riding, but his every attempt is ended abruptly by his falling off his horse (LG, p. 184). Conversation, in Looking Glass land, if not used for lecturing, becomes a game as Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, and the Red Queen give her the rules of conversing:¹⁴⁾

" . . . However, this conversation is going on a little too fast: let's go back to the last remark but one."

"I'm afraid I ca'n't[sic]remember it," Alice said, very politely.

"In that case we start afresh," said Humpty Dumpty, "and it's my turn to choose a subject--" ("He talks about it just as if it was a game!" thought Alice.) (LG, p. 161)

"Contrariwise," added the one marked 'DEE,' "if you think we're alive, you ought to speak!"

". . . you've begun wrong!" cried Tweedledum. "The first thing in a visit is to say, 'How d'ye do?' and shake hands!" And here the two brothers gave each other a hug, and then they held out the two hands that were free, to shake hands with her. (LG, p. 139)

The Red Queen broke the silence by saying, to the White Queen, "I invite you to Alice's dinner-party this afternoon."

The White Queen smiled feebly, and said, "And I invite *you*."

"I didn't know I was to have a dinner-party at all," said Alice; "but, if there *is* to be one, I think *I* ought to invite the guests!"

"We gave you the opportunity of doing it," the Red Queen remarked: "but I daresay you've not had many lessons in manners yet."
(LG, p. 193)

Not only did he satirize the didacticism and educational stance of previous children's books, Carroll left his Alice books devoid of moral instruction. He manifests this absence of morality in the following ways: A) The characters and events in *Looking Glass* follow a purposeless order, implying an absence of God or the presence of a pagan wyrd. B) Normal rules of order are sacrificed to the logic (and lack thereof) of Looking Glass land and Wonderland. C) Even though the presence of death is felt strongly throughout both books, the characters seem to treat it in the most casual fashion, as if it had no force or reality. D) There are no consequences for actions. Characters are free to be rude, cruel, and even malicious without suffering any sort of penalty.

Any one of these tendencies would be insufficient to make the claim that the Alice books are amoral, but taken together they make a powerful argument. The first, the implication of the absence of God, is probably due, ironically enough, to Carroll's piety. Carroll was very concerned that nothing in his books should appear blasphemous in the slightest. For example, he had originally intended that one of the flowers in the garden in *Looking Glass* be a passion flower, but he changed it to a tiger lily when he discovered the origin of the name, that of Christ's passion on the cross.¹⁵⁾ This fear of blasphemy seems to have created a vacuum, resulting in the absence of God. Carpenter states this is the case when he writes, "Alice is the victim of a mindless, Godless universe."¹⁶⁾ This lack of God and purpose leaves the nursery rhyme characters in *Looking Glass* doomed to fulfill their rhyme, regardless of how they, or others, feel about it. They are fated as though an uncaring,

pagan wyrd had predestined what would happen. Humpty Dumpty must fall off his wall; Tweedledum and Tweedledee must have their fight; the rhyme Alice says about Haigha affects what will refresh the White King when he feels faint, and the Lion and the Unicorn must struggle for the crown. It never occurs to them that there is a choice. Tweedledum and Tweedledee even hint that Alice herself is merely a puppet when they tell her she is a figment of the Red King's dream and will eventually go out "Bang!--just like a candle!" when he wakes up (LG, p. 145). This makes Alice cry. Even Alice's coronation seems pointless as Alice is put through an absurd examination and a more absurd ceremony.

But where is the player of this grand scale chess game? Is there a Grand Motivator who guides the pieces along? *If* He exists, He is completely arbitrary and does not know the rules of chess very well. As Taylor points out, the rules of chess in the story are broken: multiple moves are made by the white pieces; at one point the White King is in check and nothing is done about this, and the Queens castle.¹⁷⁾ The pieces may follow a structure, but the structure itself is hollow (some of its own rules are broken), and the characters accomplish nothing. The structure and its weaknesses ultimately result in a chaos Alice ends by waking.

Many rules besides the chess rules are broken. For example, good manners, especially in *Wonderland*, seem to be purely optional. Even in *Looking Glass* a large number of characters are supercilious and condescending, if not arrogant, when talking to Alice. Also, language rules are broken as Humpty Dumpty takes his own system of linguistics to a ridiculous extreme. Language also breaks down when Alice reads "Jabberwocky":

"It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.)

"Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas, only I don't know what they are!" (LG, p. 188)

Another symptom of the breakdown of language is the way conversations move the characters to total chaos, toward absolute nothingness, and then, just when the conversation stands at the brink, someone changes the subject. Carpenter notes this when he observes this principle at work in the Mad Tea Party:¹⁸⁾

Then you keep moving round, I suppose?" said Alice.

"Exactly so," said the Hatter: "as the things get used up."

"But what happens when you come to the beginning again?"

Alice ventured to ask.

"Suppose we change the subject," the March Hare interrupted, yawning. (W, p. 58)

The same thing happens in *Looking Glass* when the two queens examine Alice to see if she is fit to be Queen:

"Speak when you're spoken to!" the Queen sharply interrupted her.

"But if everybody obeyed that rule," said Alice, who was always ready for a little argument, "and if you only spoke when you were spoken to, and the other person always waited for you to begin, you see nobody would ever say anything, so that--" "Ridiculous!" cried the Queen. "Why, don't you see, child--" here she broke off with a frown, and, after thinking for a minute, suddenly changed the subject of the conversation. (LO, p. 192)

This tendency of the conversation to hang at the brink of nothingness is also shown by the way death is mentioned and discussed. William Empson first noted the frequency of death jokes and how early they appear in the text of *Wonderland* (within the first three pages of the book).¹⁹⁾ There are many in *Looking Glass*:

"Crawling at your feet," said the Gnat (Alice drew her feet back in some alarm), "you may observe a Bread-and-butter-fly. . . ."

"And what does it live on?"

“Weak tea with cream in it.”

A new difficulty came into Alice’s head. “Supposing it couldn’t find any?” she suggested.

“Then it would die of course.”

“But that must happen very often,” Alice remarked thoughtfully.

“It always happens,” said the Gnat. (LG, p. 134)

Numerous others exist: “The Walrus and the Carpenter” is a poem based on the deception and consumption of a great many innocents. Alice leaves Humpty Dumpty and then hears a great crashing sound, Humpty Dumpty’s fall, though that is never stated. At an earlier point, Humpty Dumpty makes a sinister suggestion when he discusses Alice’s age with her: “‘I mean,’ she said, ‘that one ca’n’t [sic] help growing older.’ ‘One ca’n’t, [sic] perhaps,’ said Humpty Dumpty; ‘but two can. With proper assistance you might have left off at seven’” (LG, p. 162). Another character, the Gnat, literally sighs himself away, and Alice merely notices how chilly it has become and walks off. Mulderig points out that this attitude towards death is vastly different from the attitude in much of Victorian children’s literature, which seemed to portray death (of the hero or of a loved one) as the greatest punishment, one inevitably inflicted for wrongdoing and sin, one that usually entailed a good bit of suffering.²⁰⁾

This last example shows the general attitude of the book towards death: death is meaningless, frequently discussed but rarely (if ever) having any real power. The Lion and the Unicorn fight fiercely for the crown, yet no one gets hurt. The Red Knight and the White Knight fight and fall from their horses constantly, yet neither seems to become injured. The ideal example in *Wonderland* is the plight of the victims of the Queen of Hearts who, though frequently ordered to be put to death, are never actually executed, as the Griffin explains (W, p. 74). The Gnat does sigh himself away, but that is done almost as an aside, in the latter part of the last line of a short paragraph, and the careless reader can easily miss it.

Humpty Dumpty falls, but, as I noted earlier, his death is purely by implication, probably merely to fulfill his rhyme. The Jabberwock and the oysters are the only overt deaths occurring in the book, and these happen in the literature of Looking Glass land: one extra step removed from reality. If the book we read is a step removed from what is real, then a book the characters in a book read must be two steps removed. If anything can be more unreal than fiction, the deaths of the Jabberwock and the oysters are.

Last, the Alice books, *Looking Glass* specifically, show a notable lack of consequence for actions. Alice rides a train ticketless, and gets away with it. The Walrus and the Carpenter destroy innocent oysters but are not punished. Tweedledee breaks Tweedledum's new rattle (and though they prepare to fight about it, the fight never actually occurs). Haigha is rude to the White King with impunity. The Lion and the Unicorn are very obviously fighting to take the White King's crown, yet the White King allows this, merely fretting on the sidelines (the reader, in fact, has the impression that the White King would be powerless to stop it). There is no system of justice, no system of sowing and reaping, and, therefore, no reason for good behavior. The characters of *Looking Glass*, consequently, *must* be motiveless as they move about the board in a meaningless dance toward no particular end.

All these facts lead to one conclusion: the world of *Looking Glass* is amoral. The way Carroll ignores consequences for actions and mocks educators and teachers (remember, Carroll spoofs didacticism and states that the Red Queen is a type of governess [p. 283]) indicates this. The normal rules of society--language, manners, chess (chess rules must be considered important in Looking Glass land, since they are the structure for the world itself)--are broken or set aside. God, or a God figure, is notably lacking, leaving the characters doomed to act out arbitrary fates that leave no possibility for will or action. Death itself is largely meaningless. Probably, since nursery rhymes are, in a sense, timeless, were another person after Alice to visit Looking Glass

land, he/she would find Humpty Dumpty on his wall ready to explicate poetry again and all the other characters primed to re-enact their roles. When a reader returns to a nursery rhyme, everything happens again the same way. Therefore, a world based on nursery rhymes must be prepared to reset itself to replay for each visitor.

Physicists would call this sort of world a closed system, a universe where nothing may leave or enter. In such a system, no significant changes may occur, i.e., no energy may be lost nor may any be added. If *Looking Glass* is based on a closed universe, Alice's role must then, by definition, be one merely of a viewer and not of a true participant, and such it is. Alice is free to discuss things, and even help characters in minor ways (tying knots and pinning things, serving cake, etc.), but she can alter nothing in any significant way. It is interesting to note that she is never allowed to eat or drink anything in Looking Glass land (in fact, a biscuit the Red Queen offers Alice to quench her thirst chokes her [LG 127]), though other characters eat and drink freely in front of her. The reality is probably that she cannot eat, at least not in the normal sense, for to do so would allow her to take something out of the world; neither can she add anything to it. She views it in a dream and leaves nothing behind her when she wakes. Because of this inability to affect anything, Alice is, in a functional sense, imaginary, and *Looking Glass* is, above all else, a world supremely unaffected by external agents.

This amoral closed universe is quite different from the Victorian ideal, from a world of scientific rules ordered by a sentient, real God. Actually, the fact that this book is for children makes it revolutionary, considering the didacticism of most nineteenth-century children's literature. None of the other ground-breaking fantasy books mentioned earlier portray similar amoral or Godless perspectives. Yet the two Alice books were very popular. *Pall Mall Gazette*, at the end of the nineteenth century, took a poll to find the twenty books best for a ten-year-old. *Through the Looking*

Glass was number eleven.²¹⁾ Reconciling the differences between the Victorian world view of the time and the world view of *Through the Looking Glass* may seem hard until you think of the way Carroll presented this perspective. He put this world view into a book of nonsense. Doing this very effectively neutralized any sort of threat the book might make and allowed the Victorians an out that any other sort of presentation would not have allowed: laughter. That the Victorians found it funny can hardly be doubted. *The Monthly Packet*, a young girl's Anglican magazine with a serious bent, praised *Looking Glass* for its humor: "We can figure to ourselves the shrieks of laughter with which it will be hailed. . . . It is one long dream of sheer nonsense."²²⁾ Larry Niven states that laughter is an interrupted defense mechanism, that one laughs when one is made vulnerable and wishes to defuse the vulnerability.²³⁾ Carroll's Victorian anti-norm, his amoral world of, ultimately, logical nonsense, would provoke just such a reaction from the reader. As the Victorians struggled with the concept of evolution and the possibility of a world without God, the fact that the world view presented struck rather close to home could only be made safe by being made funny. The Victorians laughed, not only because it was nonsense, but precisely because it *did* strike close to home; Carroll used the device of *Looking Glass* to hold a mirror up to society.

1) "Children's Books," *The Athenaeum* (16 Dec. 1865), p. 844, as quoted in Gerald Mulderig, "Alice and Wonderland: Subversive Elements in the World of Victorian Children's Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11 (Summer 1977), 320.

2) "Christmas Gift Books," *The Illustrated London News* (16 Dec. 1865), p. 844, as quoted in Gerald Mulderig, "Alice and Wonderland: Subversive Elements in the World of Victorian Children's Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11 No. 1 (Summer 1977), 320.

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- 3) In *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 321-30.
 - 4) Avery, p. 323.
 - 5) "Corrective Laughter: Carroll's Alice and Popular Children's Literature of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 1 (1967), 245.
 - 6) Rackin, pp. 246-47.
 - 7) Rackin, p. 249.
 - 8) Lewis Carroll, "The Diaries, 1856-62," in Gray, p. 261.
 - 9) 1984 ed., p. 177.
 - 10) *Morphology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 25-65.
 - 11) "Parson Lot Takes a Cold bath: Charles Kingsley and the Water Babies," in *Secret Gardens* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1985, p. 24.
 - 12) Rackin, pp. 244, 252.
 - 13) "Logic and Language in *Through the Looking Glass*," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 18, No. 1 (April 1961), 95-96.
 - 14) Charles Matthews, "Satire in the Alice Books," *Criticism: a Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 12, No. 2 (Spring 1970), 112.
 - 15) Matthews, p. 108.
 - 16) Carpenter, p. 67.
 - 17) "Chess and Theology in the Alice Books," in *Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland . . . Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 368.
 - 18) Carpenter, pp. 60-61.
 - 19) "The Child as Swain," in *Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland . . . Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Donald J. Gray (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 347.
 - 20) "Alice and Wonderland: Subversive Elements in the World of Victorian Children's Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11, No. 1 (Summer 1977), 326-27.
 - 21) Avery, pp. 329-30.
 - 22) Ed. Charlotte Yonge, as quoted in Avery, p. 329.
 - 23) "The Soft Weapon," in *Neutron Star* (New York: Ballantine, 1968),

p. 76. Niven mentions this as an aside because this is hardly a new concept and has been discussed by many writers.