

Abstract

This essay is an analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The novel is often perceived merely as a trip to a fantasy world created by Alice's imagination. The reader is conveyed to Wonderland, a world that has no apparent connection with reality. It seems to be a place ruled by nonsense and incoherence, where the reader loses track of time and space. Nonetheless, many elements of the novel reflect aspects of the author's time, Victorian Britain. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that one of the underlying intentions of the author was to satirise the Victorian Age. In order to corroborate this statement, the essay first provides the reader with some historical and political background, and the social and cultural background of the Victorian era. The novel is then analysed through discussing the diverse happenings of Alice's journey through Wonderland and interpreting the references to Victorian Britain as satire. The analysis of the novel consists of two major aspects. First, an analysis of diverse elements related to the political and historical context. This exposes how British imperialism and ethnocentrism are satirised in the novel, such as through Alice's inability to understand that Wonderland has its own set of values. The British judicial system is also satirised through the authority figures of Wonderland such as the Queen and King of Hearts. Secondly, there is an analysis of the social and cultural elements that are satirised in the novel. The satire on these elements is mainly focused on the rigid educational system of Victorian Britain, which was based on memorising techniques. The essay then discusses the satire on the social conventions, manners and etiquette of the Victorian era, which is represented through the bizarre conversations and situations with Wonderland creatures in which Alice gets involved.

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Introduction

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, published in 1865, is a journey into a little Victorian girl's imagination. Alice falls down a rabbit-hole and finds herself in Wonderland, a bizarre world in which she encounters a series of very peculiar characters. She gets involved in strange situations and conversations with Wonderland's inhabitants.

Lewis Carroll was Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's pseudonym. He was a very versatile man; he was an ordained Anglican deacon, a logician and a pioneer in photography. At the time he wrote the novel, he was a mathematical lecturer at Christ Church College, Oxford. It was there where he met the girl who inspired the *Alice* books: Alice Pleasance Liddell was one of the three daughters of Henry Liddell, the Deacon at Christ Church and close friend to Carroll. The novel was originally a tale told spontaneously to the three Liddell sisters on a boat trip up the Thames. This novel is often perceived as merely a trip to a fantasy world created by Alice's imagination, which has no connection with reality. It is widely classified as children's literature; nonetheless it is enjoyed by both children and adults. In fact, the novel is filled with logical games and with many references to Carroll's private life as well as to the society of the time (Millikan). C. S. Lewis described good children's stories in his book *On Three Ways of Writing for Children* in 1952 as follows: "A children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story. The good ones last, because a children's story is the best art-form for something you have to say" (qtd. in Green ix). Carroll uses Alice and the nonsensical Wonderland creatures to satirise Victorian society. This task would be more difficult to accomplish within the limits of more serious writing.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has been analysed from a wide variety of viewpoints: as an exploration of the human mind, with the purpose of finding an esoteric meaning connected to mathematics and logic, in relation to psychological references, symbolism, or even as a surreal effect of the use of drugs. This essay is an analysis of the novel. Its objective is to demonstrate that the Victorian era is represented in the novel through satire. In order to confirm this statement, this essay begins by providing the historical and social context of the Victorian era, which will be contrasted with the world created by Lewis Carroll. The analysis shows that certain situations, elements and characters of Wonderland are connected to the reality of the Victorian era.

It demonstrates how there is a constant relationship between fiction and reality in the novel, and how this relationship works to satirise the Victorian era.

1. Historical and political context: the Victorian era

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was published in 1865, at the pinnacle of the Victorian period in the United Kingdom. This period of time was comprised of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 until her death in 1901. The Victorian era is characterised in broad terms by being a period of prosperity and peace for the British nation. During the 19th century, the British Empire reached its peak, expanding its territories all over the world. British colonies reached Canada, part of the West Indies, some areas of the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the Pacific Ocean, for example Fiji, Tonga and Papua. The African territories connected Egypt with South Africa. In an imperialist delirium, the building of a road called Cairo to Cape Town, which would cross the whole African continent was seriously considered. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided the Empire with a shorter route to India, which increased the economic activities of Britain and its presence in the Middle-East. Cyprus was also colonised as it was strategically located in the new corridor to India through the Mediterranean Sea (Purchase 57).

Despite losing the 13 American colonies during the 18th century, the Empire extended to nearly one fourth of the planet's land area by the end of the 19th century and it encompassed 400 million inhabitants. In 1850, London held the first world's fair, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, also known as the Crystal Palace. It was to prove Britain's supremacy in manufacture and design, and make obvious the success of Britain's free-trade policy. With its only potential enemy being the Russian Empire, Britain became the first global power. It became the most important international actor, becoming the referent international mediator. It brought a relative period of peace known as "Pax Britannica" (Purchase 57), only disrupted when the nation got involved in the Crimean War in 1854, when the Russian Empire wanted to expand to Europe through the Crimean peninsula.

During the 1840's, the British Empire underwent a boom in railway construction. As the manufacturing industries were growing, there was a need for transportation of cargo. The price of railway shares increased and speculators took advantage of it, investing large amounts of money and creating a speculative bubble. The new railway net provided the easiest and fastest transport of people and cargo at the time. In a

country where every province had its own costumes, dialogues and cultural traditions, railways boosted national cohesion as cheap fares enabled common people to travel around Britain. Newspapers could be distributed daily from London and reach every corner of the country within the same day. Services and goods from a single area could be integrated into a large economy in a cheap and efficient way. Up to 24.000 km of railways would be built before 1889. Railways became the pride of the Empire, an emblem of the British nation. This railway mania contributed to the Crystal Palace euphoria during the 1840's, but would slowly lose momentum toward the end of the century (Altick 78).

During the 1840's and 1850's Britain's economy boomed without precedent. By the 1850's Britain was considered incomparably the richest nation on earth. It was the leading banker, shipper, and supplier of manufactured goods. The tonnage of ships sailing to and from British ports doubled between the 1840's and the 1860's. By 1870 British foreign trade was three or four times bigger than that of the USA. From 1851 to 1881, in just three decades, the gross national income doubled (Altick 12). Thus, by the time *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published, in 1865, the United Kingdom was undergoing a period of unprecedented economic prosperity, general optimism and confidence as a nation. There was a general feel-good atmosphere and patriotic sentiment. With the growth of the Empire, the British nation had the feeling of being on top of the world and of being unstoppable.

2. Social and cultural context

Victorian society was divided into well-defined social classes. The hierarchical structure based on hereditary privilege was a result of years of tradition as a feudal society. In Victorian Britain the concept of "deference", that is, the acknowledgement that the classes above one's own are justly entitled to their superiority, was strongly rooted at all levels of society: people were conscious of their own social status. This belief was so internalised that it guaranteed the continuity of this social structure. Although social fluidity increased during the Victorian era, the class structure survived through the 19th century. Any subversive movements would not take root due to this sacred nature of the hierarchical system (Altick 18).

An important aspect of Victorian society was the changes in rural and urban populations. The Industrial Revolution began sometime in the middle of the 18th century and went on into the first half of the 19th century. In many ways it had a great impact on

all classes of citizens. It was the transition from manual labour to machine production, allowing for a faster and more efficient way of manufacturing goods. The stationary steam engine was a crucial element in this transition. Factories were established near sources of iron or coal. Britain became a great producer of textiles, and raw cotton became the largest imported product. However, large scale manufacturing required hand labour and therefore large numbers of people moved from the countryside to the city in order to work in factories. This unregulated factory system brought great prosperity for a lucky minority, but great misery for the factory workers. They were very poorly paid, and working conditions were deplorable. Child labour was also widespread across the country (Altick 39). The movement of population from the countryside to the cities brought many changes. This new working class found work in the areas where industries and railroad construction were growing. Cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield increased their population by 50% just in the decade from 1821 to 1831. These once country towns were unprepared to host such a large amount of people. Therefore slums quickly proliferated and enlarged the cities. During Victorian times London's population increased from 2 to 6 million (Altick 78). Cities became unpleasant places to live, contrasting with the idyllic countryside, depicted in many Victorian novels.

The new industrialism made the gap between poor and rich people even wider. The misery of the new working class contrasted with the shameless luxurious lives of the Regency period. During the 1820's and 1830's silver fork novels were written. They were novels about the lives of the high society. They lost popularity in favour of novels of social protest during the 1840's, which were fewer in number but larger in influence. One of the most famous of these is Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, which condemned the Poor Law, which forced poor people to move into workhouse systems and orphanages (Altick 10). The novel *Sybil; or the Two Nations* was written in 1845 by Benjamin Disraeli, who would be Prime Minister in 1868. It intended to expose the evident problem of the working class, the inhumane conditions in which they were living and crowding the new industrialised cities, drawing attention to the desperate state of the poor in factories and slums. In the same year the German author Friedrich Engels wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which also dealt with the terrible consequences of the Industrial Revolution for the working class, making obvious that the wealth of the British Empire was not equally distributed (Altick 11).

In 1859 Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published. It was a synthesis of scientific ideas already current, but with some crucial additions like the idea of natural selection. Its publication was a turning point for the history of science, marking the beginning of evolutionary biology. It caused a great stir in the scientific and religious communities as it challenged the Bible's conception of the creation of man. It implied that man was just another product of evolutionary history, just as any other creature in the world. This new conception of evolution generated a great polemic (Altick 13).

2.1 Victorian values and education

This period of time carries Queen Victoria's name because of the importance of her figure. She portrayed the values of her age, becoming a reference of conduct for the British people. This Victorian morality was composed by a series of values associated with prudery and decorum. There are certain clichés linked to Victorian values:

Severe moral probity, restraint, reserve, family values, a certain dourness or lack of humour, uncomfortable attitudes towards sex, stony faces in photographs, and black clothes. They are equally notorious for their intolerance towards social 'deviants' of all types. Criminals, lunatics, homosexuals and stray women were all treated severely or punished, and masturbation was discouraged by cold baths. (Purchase 2)

During the 1830s books about etiquette re-emerged and became very popular. After the great success of silver-fork novels in the 1820's, publishers and writers realised that marketing aristocratic manners to middle class readers would be of enormous profit. This type of manuals had already existed since the early 15th century. In the 15th and early 16th centuries these books were addressed to the children of aristocratic parents. They would instruct them on matters of behaviour and conduct in the household. During the 17th century the target of etiquette writers was young men with a career to make at court. Nonetheless, during the great boom of etiquette books in Victorian England, these were addressed to the middle class, and more specifically to the newly rich, a class that emerged during this period of time. Until the beginning of the century being rich implied being an aristocrat (Curtin 411). But with industrialisation the newly rich class was born. In 1836 etiquette writer Charles Day wrote about his expected readership in *Hints on Etiquette*:

In a mercantile country like England, people are continually rising in the world, shopkeepers become merchants, and mechanics manufacturers ... it rarely

occurs that the polish of their manners keeps pace with the rapidity of their advancement. (qtd. in Curtin 412)

These books on etiquette reflected Victorian England very well. They taught people how to behave in social situations and how to make use of good manners. There were books addressed particularly to ladies, like *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility* by Emily Thornwell. It became a very popular book that instructed on manners, dress and conversation in all kinds of company and circumstances. This book included chapters such as "Gentility and Refinement of Manners in all the relations of Home and Society" or "The art of conversing with fluency and propriety" (Thornwell 12-13). Being proper and having good manners played a very important role in the higher classes of this society. Also, sexual restraint was emphasised in Victorian England. Prudery and modesty were considered great virtues, especially in women. A good showcase of Victorian modesty is the bathing machine: it was a changing room on wheels, resembling old-style caravans that were drawn by horses down to the beach in order to protect the bathers' privacy and to prevent exposure to the sun (Green 255).

3. *Alice in Wonderland* as a children's story, nonsense literature and possible satire

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was written for children and is a classic in children's literature. It is also considered nonsense literature, a genre which was introduced in the Victorian period. This genre plays with linguistic and logical sense (Matthews 106). Victorians were fond of puns and riddles, and nonsense verses such as Edward Lear's were popular. Even Alice uses the word nonsense in different situations when something appears to be lacking in sense. Carroll uses all kinds of stylistic devices in order to create the nonsense effect: he plays with synonyms, homonyms, homophones, metaphors, oxymorons, onomatopoeias, and so on. The inhabitants of Wonderland are often the ones who do not follow the basic rules of language, they turn the logical sense of what they are saying upside down, making Alice very confused. The following conversation demonstrates very well Carroll's use of nonsense, which plays both with the meaning and sound of words:

'And how many hours a day did you do lessons?' said Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.

'Ten hours the first day,' said the Mock Turtle: 'nine the next, and so on.'

'What a curious plan!' exclaimed Alice.

‘That’s the reason they’re called lessons,’ the Gryphon remarked: ‘because they lessen from day to day.’ (Carroll 87)

Carroll also used neologisms as a nonsensical literary device. He invented new words such as “uglification” (Carroll 86), which is a course the Mock Turtle had to attend at school.

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland has been analysed from a large variety of perspectives since it was published. All kinds of conclusions have been drawn about the message the author was trying to convey through the novel: it has inspired countless publications during its 150 years of existence. It has been analysed from a very wide spectrum of interpretations: historical, mathematical, psychoanalytic or feminist interpretations, or even considered as a psychedelic experience (Millikan). As previously mentioned, the novel has reached beyond its original audience and is now appreciated by adults as well as by children. It is possible to see beyond this apparent world of fantasy and find elements of Victorian society reflected in it. To begin with, most of the creatures of Wonderland behave as contemporary human beings. They have anthropomorphic features, such as the ability to speak. Some of them even wear human clothes, like the White Rabbit, who wears white gloves and a waistcoat (Carroll 10). As Matthews claims in his article on satire in the Alice books, “the presence of Alice as a norm, as the embodiment of Victorian practicality and industry, suggests that Alice’s books may have satirical implications” (109). The very English Alice as a norm contrasting with the nonsense of Wonderland creates comical situations that can be assimilated as satire of Victorian society. The satire we encounter in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* focuses on diverse aspects of Victorian society and human nature through Alice and the bizarre creatures of Wonderland with their human features. These aspects are analysed more closely in the following chapters.

Furthermore, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was written in an era where social and political satire was becoming more and more popular in Britain (Faflak 215). It seems like the seriousness and earnestness of the Victorian period were somewhat compensated by the comic impulse of the time. Humorous periodicals became very popular in Victorian England. *Punch* was a very popular magazine which was published in 1841. This humorous publication was known for its mocking cartoons, as well as for its satiric prose and verse (Faflak 213). As a matter of fact, Sir John Tenniel, illustrator of the Alice books, was a famous cartoon drawer for *Punch* magazine and also well-

known because of his edition of *Æsop's Fables* (1848). He was asked by Carroll to illustrate the *Alice* books as this would guarantee their success.

4. *Alice in Wonderland* as historical and political satire

This chapter is dedicated to the elements of the novel that can be categorised as a satire of the historical and political context of the era. It is divided in two major themes: imperialism and justice.

4.1 Imperialism

Alice was written at a time when the British Empire was expanding and new lands and societies were being discovered, as stated above. Victorian Britain was a golden age for explorers and travellers. They contributed to the expansion of the British Empire, both in size and knowledge. Alice is also an explorer in Wonderland: she is an English girl who happens to be entering a foreign land. As a girl from an upper class household, she is refined and educated. Alice has been taught lessons in different subjects, from History to Math, and she knows the basics of etiquette. Nonetheless, Alice's adventures begin with her intrusion into the rabbit-hole, the White Rabbit's home. She does not apply the standards of English politeness and goes into the rabbit-hole without hesitation. As she comes from an imperialist country, she shows this imperialistic behaviour in Wonderland. As an explorer, Alice advances through Wonderland, a completely alien place. This land is populated by beings that are unknown to her, and who are governed by a set of rules which are unfamiliar. Like Britain, Wonderland seems to be a monarchy with its own social codes. Alice interferes in these creatures' lives in order to find out what these rules are. It is often the case that the social codes of Wonderland do not apply to those Alice has learned. Instead of adapting to this new society she does not conform to its values and acts as if she was entitled to impose her own. Alice is therefore the reflection of British imperialism during her stay in Wonderland. Her imperialist attitude is a reflection of the ethnocentrism that the British imposed upon their colonies.

Alice gets involved in some games and social events that have some common features with those of 19th century Britain. Bivona suggests in his article "Alice the Child-Imperialist" that these events reflect the customs and traditions of the invaded land. Wonderland is being disrupted by Alice, who does not accept the native rules (154), therefore manifesting her ethnocentric behaviour. The first game Alice is

introduced to is the Caucus-Race. She assumes that this kind of race has the same features as the ones she is used to play. As any other Victorian child, Alice knows that a race has a beginning, an end, and a winner. However, in Wonderland the race does not have a specific shape, as the contestants are not lined up and run around randomly. A caucus-race, in politics, is a “committee called to decide general action of the group or party”, although it is suggested that “committee members generally do a lot of running around in circles, getting nowhere, and with everybody wanting a political plum” (Green 256), just like the creatures in the novel. The race also finishes arbitrarily, when the Dodo decides to put an end to it. The winner is not a matter of concern in the caucus-race, as everybody wins and emphasis is placed on the award ceremony, in which Alice is forced to participate despite her initial reservations. The Dodo decides that Alice will be the one to present the awards, which are given to all the participants. As an imperialist in Wonderland, Alice does not seem to be very respectful towards the creatures’ game. Alice views the Caucus-Race as something absurd and almost laughs at it, but to Wonderland creatures it seems to be a serious business, as they all look very grave (Carroll 26-27).

The next game Alice stumbles upon is the Queen’s croquet game. Again she tries to assimilate Wonderland’s game of croquet as if it were the English version. As a matter of fact, there are some elements that resemble the English croquet Alice is used to: there are croquet balls and mallets, but these are hedgehogs and flamingos respectively. The hedgehogs are supposed to go through arches as well, but the arches are the Queen’s soldiers doubling themselves up and standing on their hands and feet. Unlike the English croquet ground “it was all ridges and furrows” (Carroll 73) instead of flat. This fact makes the game a rather complicated version of croquet. Moreover, the hedgehogs and flamingos would not stay in the same position very long, and the soldiers always get up and walk off to other parts of the croquet ground (Carroll 74). The players do not wait for their turn, but instead all of them play at once. Another rule which is unfamiliar to Alice is that the Queen cannot lose. All these rules and particularities make Alice consider it a very twisted croquet game. So as a result, Alice interprets it as an impossible version of the English game. She does not realise that Wonderland and England’s version of croquet are based on different values. Both at the Caucus-Race and at the Queen’s Croquet Ground Alice imposes her own version onto the games instead of considering that Wonderland might have its own types of games, based on its own values.

The next social event that Alice attends is the “Mad Tea-Party”. Despite not having been invited, Alice becomes an intruder in the party:

‘No room! No room!’ they cried out when they saw Alice coming. ‘There’s plenty of room!’ said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table. (Carroll 60)

As happened often in the history of imperialism, the intruders and natives in Carroll’s tale eventually achieve a temporary status quo. This provisional agreement disguises momentarily the fact that their social codes are completely different (Bivona 156). This temporary status quo also takes place at the Tea-Party. Alice is first confused by the fact that the table is set for a large number of people while the only ones attending the tea-party are the March Hare, the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse. The Hatter gives Alice an explanation: since the Queen accused him of murdering time, it has always been six o’clock, “It’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles” (Carroll 64). Somehow Alice finds this explanation convincing enough, and this occasion is one of the few in which Alice can find common ground with Wonderland creatures.

4.2 Justice and authority

Carroll wrote several political pamphlets and letters which were published in diverse newspapers and magazines. He was a man of firm principles and was particularly concerned about fairness. He used his mathematical abilities in order to improve fairness in political procedures. “Dodgson involved himself in the important political issues of his day: the extension of the voting franchise, the redistribution of seats in the House of Commons, and the methods of achieving proportional representation in the House” (Abeles 8). As previously mentioned, Victorian morality was characterised by its low tolerance of crime. Crime was severely punished, and sometimes the punishments would be excessive and often applied to the wrong person. This legal system, often corrupted, tended to punish the lower classes more harshly. Carroll, as a man devoted to equality, satirises the judicial system in the novel.

In the last two chapters of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, XI and XII, Alice attends a trial. The Knave of Hearts is accused of stealing the tarts the Queen of Hearts made. The King is both monarch and judge, so he wears the wig and the crown at the same time, making him look quite ridiculous. Throughout the trial both the King and Queen of Hearts show an intimidating attitude towards all the participants of the trial,

threatening them constantly. The first witness called to testify is the Mad Hatter, who is under great pressure. The Queen keeps staring intensely at the Hatter, who grows more and more nervous to the point of shifting from one foot to the other. “‘Give your evidence,’ said the King; ‘and don’t be nervous, or I’ll have you executed on the spot.’” Later on he insists more severely: “‘Give your evidence ... or I’ll have you executed, whether you’re nervous or not’” (Carroll 99). After the Hatter, the second witness is called: the Duchess’s cook. While she is being questioned, the Dormouse interrupts while being half asleep. The Queen loses her temper and shrieks all sorts of intimidations, including death threats. In the meanwhile, the second witness takes the chance to run away, presumably scared by the authorities. Then the third witness is called: Alice. They are still without a single piece of evidence. The members of the jury keep writing down unnecessary information and by doing so contradict one another. Since Alice starts to grow to her real size, the King states “Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court*” (Carroll 105). According to the king, this is the oldest rule in the book, but Alice objects that it cannot be true, since the oldest rule in the book should be Number One.

During the novel the Queen of Hearts orders death threats constantly (“Off with his head! ... Off with her head” (Carroll 74)). These threats stay false promises during the entire novel, implying that authority figures do not stick to their declarations; their words are often empty promises. They frequently make mistakes and do not necessarily follow a code of morality. This is direct criticism to the absurdity of authoritative extremes. Carroll also implies that authority figures should be doubted. Alice questions the authorities of Wonderland several times. As a matter of fact, the novel ends with Alice rebelling against the Queen, who once again sentences Alice to death:

‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

‘Who cares for *you?*’ said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time).

‘You’re nothing but a pack of cards!’ (Carroll 109).

Therefore authority is portrayed as inconsistent and not trustworthy: first, a decision is made, and only afterwards it is argued, or an attempt made to justify it. When the White Rabbit brings in a letter as a new piece of evidence, the King intends to give his verdict without even reading the letter. The King assumes that the Knave must have written it and declares him guilty without even knowing the letter’s content. Moreover, the Queen states “Sentence first –verdict afterwards” (Carroll 108). Through the authority figures of the King and Queen of Hearts and their disproportioned abuse of power, Carroll

satirises the intimidating British judicial system, but also justice in general. There is a double moral both in the Wonderland trial and in Victorian reality; despite being a society that was concerned with morals and very strict with crime, the authorities' punishments were often unfair and particularly prejudiced towards the disadvantaged classes.

5. *Alice in Wonderland* as social and cultural satire

This chapter is dedicated to the elements of the novel that can be categorised as a satire of the social and cultural context of the era. It takes scenes where social and cultural norms are depicted and argues how they are presented as satire. The section is divided in two major themes: education and regimentation and Victorian values, morals and etiquette.

5.1 Education and regimentation

In the Victorian era children were subjected to harsh regimentation. In Victorian England memorising techniques had a very important role to play in the learning process, not only for fact-learning but also as a reading-acquisition technique. This kind of learning method was developed during the 18th century by Puritans as a way of religious instruction for children. In Victorian England nursery rhymes, songs and ballads were written as an easy and playful way to teach children about moral standards and to avoid mischief (Dědková 12). They were the leading learning technique in England for a long period of time, so for Victorian children recitation was an important element of their lives, and so it is for Alice. Carroll himself grew up in a very methodical family and was familiar with this kind of regimentation. He seemed to be particularly annoyed by the rules that were imposed on him (Matthews 110).

Throughout Alice's adventures many nonsensical poems and songs are recited or sung, either by her or by Wonderland creatures. In the novel Carroll mocks the memorising technique by rewriting didactic poems by well-known authors of the time, resulting in parody. There are three poems that parody the educational method of learning by heart. In all cases it is announced beforehand that they are going to be recited, and then Alice proceeds to recite them in her own way. The first parody that the reader encounters is the poem "How doth the little crocodile", a parody of Isaac Watts's "Against Idleness and Mischief", a didactic poem from *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*. This book was written in 1715 but Watts's verses

were so popular that they were recited even a century later (Dědková 17). Alice decides to recite it after arriving in Wonderland in order to make sure that she is still herself. The impact of didactic poems on children was so strong that Alice links her ability of reciting by heart to her identity, and this is one of the most commonly recited didactic poems of her time (Dědková 38). “How doth the Crocodile” and “Against Idleness and Mischief” have a very similar structure and Carroll replaced some key words of the original poem in order to change its morals completely. In Watts’s poem the importance of hard work is highlighted. He uses the example of an industrious bee, “How doth the little busy Bee/Improve each shining Hour/And gather Honey all the Day/From ev’ry op’ning Flow’r”. Carroll replaces the bee by a crocodile, and exchanges key words such as *busy*, *labour*, *skilfully*, *improve*, etc., by words with completely different meanings: *grin*, *cheerfully* or *smiling*. Alice recites the poem as she remembers it, but she realises after the two first stanzas that “those are not the right words” (Carroll 19). In fact, they reflect the opposite idea of Watts’s poem: the crocodile’s relaxed nature is exalted.

When Alice meets the Caterpillar she tests her identity again by reciting another didactic poem which Victorian children were expected to learn by heart. Alice recites “You are old, Father William” which is a parody of Robert Southey’s “The Old Man’s Comforts” (Green 256). In Southey’s poem a young man asks his father questions about his life. The father is patient and appears to be nostalgic, quiet and patient. He also remarks on the importance of God. However, in Carroll’s parody the father reflects the opposite values: he is impatient, violent and unpleasant. Alice tests her memory one last time in the Lobster-Quadrille chapter. The Gryphon tells Alice to recite “The Sluggard”, another of Isaac Watts’s *Divine Songs for Children*. This poem, intended to warn children about the dangers of a lazy life, describes the life of a person who is careless and does nothing self-improving. “’Tis the Voice of the Lobster”, unlike the other parodied poems, does not reverse the moral of the original poem, but it changes the meaning of it completely: it talks about a lobster that has been overcooked. “[Alice] hardly knew what she was saying” (Carroll 93), as she tries to recite the verses. Therefore, Carroll insists on the fact that this kind of educational technique of repeating is completely inconsistent, as Alice is unable to remember even the contents of the poem.

In Victorian Britain the recitation of poems had a fixed protocol. These poems had to be repeated while adopting a specific body and hand position as this was supposed to help children memorise texts (Dědková 19). The way in which Alice

repeats the poems corresponds to the techniques that were used in Victorian schools and that children her age were very familiar with. In the first poem “she crossed her hands on her lap, as if she were saying lessons, and began to repeat it,” (Carroll 19). In the second one “Alice folded her hands” (Carroll 42) and in the third one the Gryphon asks her to “stand up and repeat “’Tis the voice of the sluggard”” (Carroll 93). As a Victorian girl, Alice is very familiar with these repetition techniques. In fact, when reciting the last poem she claims “How the creatures ... make one repeat lessons! ... I might just as well be at school at once” (Carroll 93), which proves that these practices were part of Alice’s educational process. As Matthews suggests, Carroll was also exposed to this type of poems (111), and some of his early poems had already mocked elements of the regimentation of children. “Speak roughly to your little boy” is a parody on David Bates’s “Speak Gently”. It is a song the Duchess sings to her baby (Carroll 54). The original song recommends talking softly and mildly to children, while Carroll’s version insists on the opposite: an overly strict approach. This parody can be perceived as a satire on the strictness of Victorian parents when it came to the education of their children. Through these parodies the author intended to mock Victorian education and regimentation, exposing his disapproval of memorising techniques. Apart from the educational system, Carroll also satirises the old literary forms. As it happens in the history of literature, new authors tend to parody the old models and methods. Poetry with instructional and moralising values had been popular since Isaac Watts’s *Divine Songs*, written at the beginning of the 18th century. Dědková suggests that Carroll’s intention was also to satirise a literary style that was starting to go out-of-date (27).

5.2 Victorian values, morals and etiquette

Alice is a typical Victorian upper-class girl. She is well-educated and speaks very respectfully and politely in all kinds of conversations, she has manners and is capable of feeling embarrassed. In the first chapter of Alice’s adventures, “Down the Rabbit-hole” the reader finds out important elements of Alice’s character:

She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people. (Carroll 15)

There are two elements in this description of Alice's personality that are worth paying attention to. Firstly, she is very conscious of herself; she is conscious of when she has been naughty and knows when to be scolded. Victorian education was focused on applying a strong code of morality and conduct from an early age through strong regimentation methods. These methods were strongly influenced by evangelic morality, which promoted prudery and decorum. Further, decorum and *savoir faire* were very important qualities (Altick 165). As we see, Alice is not an exception. She was used to being scolded, even to the point of scolding herself and boxing her own ears. Secondly, she likes pretending to be two people. This fact suggests that Alice has two selves. Firstly, the superficial one, the one that always has to be correct, gentle, prudent, and so on; the way she has been told to behave in public. The other self would be her, the way she behaves without applying all these codes of conduct, organised as a game between two characters or selves.

Victorian etiquette is ridiculed on several occasions in the novel. Despite how disrespectful Wonderland creatures are to Alice or how nonsensical the situations she encounters are, she tries to remain as polite as possible. Her first encounters with Wonderland creatures are in the Pool of Tears and the Caucus-Race episodes. When Alice meets the mouse, she wonders how a mouse should be addressed. She turns the notion upside down; she figures out the mouse should be addressed as in her brother's Latin books "A mouse, Oh mouse..." (Carroll 21). Curiously the mouse turns out to be a very respectable creature, as well as the other creatures that Alice encounters in the Pool of Tears. When Alice mentions her cat Dinah's habit of eating birds, all these creatures are offended by her comment. Nevertheless, they keep a polite and distinguished tone and come up with different excuses to leave:

This speech caused a remarkable sensation among the party. Some of the birds hurried off at once: one old Magpie began wrapping itself up very carefully, remarking 'I really must be getting home: the night-air doesn't suit my throat!' And a Canary called out in a trembling voice, to its children, 'Come away, my dears! It's high time you were all in bed!' On various pretexts they all moved off, and Alice was soon left alone. (Carroll 29-30)

Despite being non-human, these Wonderland creatures seem to talk and behave as contemporary human beings. They make use of a genteel tone as if they were among the high classes of Victorian society. They make up excuses in order not to appear rude by leaving all of a sudden. As previously mentioned, etiquette books meant for young men

and women were published during this period of time (Dědková 11-12). As these creatures are a parody of Victorian people, they should also be familiar with this type of books, as they seem to follow the rules of etiquette very accurately. Carroll makes fun of the hypocrisy and superficiality of Victorian protocol through this situation.

Another example of satire on manners is when Alice is holding the Duchess's baby. She tells him: "Don't grunt ... that's not at all a proper way of expressing yourself" (Carroll 55). Although it is just a baby, Alice intends to enforce appropriate manners upon it. In this case Carroll takes etiquette to extremes, as in the Mad Tea-Party chapter. Here Alice attends a tea-party, a very traditional British event. She has the following conversation with the other attendants:

'Have some wine' the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. 'I don't see any wine,' she remarked.

'There isn't any' said the March Hare.

'Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it' said Alice angrily.

'It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited' said the March Hare. (Carroll 60)

Through this nonsensical dialogue Carroll satirises the arbitrariness of etiquette. The March Hare offers Alice some wine, although there is not any. As a well-mannered girl Alice points out the rudeness of offering something he does not have. But the March Hare, at the same time, comments on her rudeness for attending an event she was not invited to. The dialogue goes on by pointing out how rude the other one is, as if it was a competition to find out who is more polite. But in the end both seem equally childish. With this Carroll satirises a society that is extremely concerned with good manners. He implies that the extremes of social conventions only create a hostile and stiffened environment where people only show their superficial self.

In the first chapter, during the fall through the rabbit-hole Alice wonders the following:

'I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?' she said aloud. 'I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think—' (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a *very* good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) '—yes, that's about the right distance—but

then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?' (Alice had no idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but thought they were nice grand words to say). (Carroll 10-11)

Even though she does not know what "latitude" or "longitude" mean, she takes the opportunity to use those words to boast about her knowledge. Despite being a little girl she gives priority to pretending to be a cultivated girl who says fancy words instead of actually knowing what they mean. Again, this hypocritical attitude is a direct critique of Victorian pomposity and the importance that appearances had in Carroll's time. As stated in the previous section, children would memorise long texts and were often asked to recite them at social events, whether they knew the meaning of what they were saying or not. Carroll seems to mock both the educational techniques as well as the morals of a system that promoted appearances instead of actually acquiring knowledge, or insight.

There is another occasion where Alice "felt glad to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge". This is after the Duchess comments that "if everybody minded their own business ... the world would go round a deal faster than it does" (Carroll 54). Alice answers: "Which would *not* be an advantage ...you see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis—" to which the Duchess replies: "Talking of axes ... chop off her head! (Carroll 54)". The Duchess, an adult and a figure of authority is portrayed as an ignorant person who cannot distinguish the word "axes" from "axis". She behaves very rudely most of the time and is very harsh to her baby. Nevertheless, when Alice meets her again, she is calmed and tries to find a moral for everything:

'Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it.'

[...]

'The game's going on rather better now,' [Alice] said, by way of keeping up the conversation a little.

'Tis so,' said the Duchess: 'and the moral of that is —"Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!"' (Carroll 80).

[...]

'Flamingoes and mustard both bite. And the moral of that is —"Birds of a feather flock together"' (Carroll 80).

The Duchess tries to find a moral in everything, but makes absolutely no sense. Despite being an adult she is depicted as a childish and capricious person who is often wrong. The Duchess tells Alice on one occasion: "You don't know much ... and that's a fact"

(Carroll 53), even though she has no evidence of this. Moreover, she is constantly making up facts and appears to be quite ignorant herself, as she believes that mustard is a mineral, for example (Carroll 81). Carroll satirises the conventions and morals of this hierarchic system that discredits the inferior ones, such as children. The Queen and King of Hearts also behave as capricious beings that follow their instincts, depending on their mood. Victorian morals considered the authority of parents and the upper-classes as something sacred (Altick 169). Through these characters, Carroll demonstrates that authority figures are closer to children than adults wanted them to think. These authority figures assume that children are ignorant, and therefore children are treated in a rude way, as Alice is often treated in Wonderland. However, the adult in question often appears to be more ignorant than Alice.

Conclusion

As has been shown in this essay, Lewis Carroll's portrait of Victorian Britain is embodied in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll created a magical world apparently detached from reality and his novel keeps being read with the same enthusiasm nowadays as when it was first published in Victorian Britain. There is no doubt that no matter how old, the reader will be transported to a fantasy world and become a child again. Wonderland appears to be a place where everything is possible, and absurdity and nonsense seem to be the order of the day. The reader is transported to fantasy backgrounds that seem to lack a place in time and space but nonetheless, the presence of the author through his ironic view of reality is reflected in it. When reading between the lines we find satirical references to Victorian Britain in Alice's journey. Through the means of comedy the author criticises diverse aspects of Victorian society, politics and education. The issues that Carroll explores in his novel are timeless ones, such as the transgression of justice, the abuse of power and so on. Hence, it is still relevant to this day.

The satire on the political issues of the time focuses on two major areas: imperialism and the British judicial system. Alice turns out to portray British ethnocentrism in Wonderland. She believes herself entitled to intervene in Wonderland's daily life in the same way British colonisers disrupted the lands they invaded. The overly strict but at the same time corrupt British judicial system of the 19th century is satirised through the King and Queen of Hearts, who are its reflection: they are intimidating, inconsistent and untrustworthy. The social ambience of Victorian Britain is satirised in how education is a recurrent theme in the novel. Throughout Alice's journey, several educational poems are recited wrongly, whereby Carroll exposes the inefficiency of memorising techniques used in Victorian schools, which had a great impact on Victorian children. Alice links her identity to these poems throughout her journey into Wonderland. Carroll manifests to what extent these techniques affected children. He also criticises how these methods gave preference to appearances over knowledge through showing how Alice is never able to repeat the poems correctly; therefore the poems always appear to have a completely different moral than the original. Victorian morality codes are portrayed as absurd. Carroll ridicules the excess of decorum and prudery in Victorian Britain; appearances and etiquette are satirised throughout Alice's adventures. She gets involved in conversations that become absurd

as a result of being too centred on using proper manners. Carroll manifests the hypocrisy of Victorian society through his portrayal of how Alice behaves in Wonderland. Even though she is only a child, she is extremely polite and has learned to behave correctly and prudently at all times. The sacredness of hierarchy and authority in Victorian Britain are also a target of Carroll's satire. Every adult and authority figure that we meet throughout the novel seems to have a litany of character defects. The Queen and King of Hearts frequently behave in a childish and capricious way, as does the Duchess. Alice is often discredited by these characters because she is just a child, even when she is right. Carroll thus manifests the excessive strictness of this hierarchical system and the subsequent underestimation of children.

In his novel *Alice in Wonderland*, therefore, Carroll is portraying a society which intends to be perfect but can in fact be as incoherent, absurd and unpredictable as a child's imagination. Victorian Britain is depicted as an adult world in which childhood has no place and the strictness and absurdity of its laws make it very difficult to be a child. Its inhabitants, as in Wonderland, do not speak, but rather talk in monologues, as if they lived in permanent solitude and isolation. They follow absurd and contradictory rules and codes of conduct. Both in Britain and Wonderland, the figures of authority seem to be inflexible, which leads them to rule a chaotic and incongruous world where there is a crisis of values; nonsense has invaded every corner. At the time Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, social changes that affected social structures, ideology, faith and philosophical movements were flourishing in Britain. Carroll questions this society through satire, and puts in evidence a society that is beginning to crumble and that will ultimately collapse. The crisis of the end of the 19th century is already palpable.

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