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***Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Literary Nonsense**
A Deconstructive Analysis of Lewis Carroll's Novel

B. A. Essay

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the main features of the nonsense genre, including its definition, characteristics and, especially, its relevance in the world of literature. Nonsense literature encourages the imagination of the reader, whether child or adult, and, at the same time, it motivates the use of the reader's wisdom to make it even greater. It is not necessary to find out the intention of the writer while he or she was creating the book. The reader must interpret the text according to his own circumstances. Without any doubt, and according to Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a critical reading must create a text because "there is nothing outside of the text."

Furthermore, the essay offers a deconstructive analysis of nonsense books by the well-known mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898), who used to sign his novels with his pen name, Lewis Carroll. Particularly, the essay focuses its investigation on Carroll's books about the unforgettable character of Alice, such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Indeed, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has been one of the world's most frequently translated works and, after Shakespeare, Carroll is possibly the world's most quoted author. The famous books about Alice were not expressly written for children; it is needless to say that also adults enjoy Carroll's unsolved logic problems.

Additionally, this essay contains an analysis of Carroll's logic problems and their utility to understand further how the current world works, for example, through the understanding of physical laws. After reading a nonsense text by Carroll, the reader goes ahead rationally in order to discover and solve what is beyond the monotonous axioms in which we are used to live. But there is more: Carroll's use of English is excellent, and his creation of coined words makes his texts even more authentic.

“I’m not myself...”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explain the relevance and meaning of literary nonsense genre and how Lewis Carroll used this genre in his works *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). At the same time, there will be provided examples of those “unsolved” problems that Carroll mentioned in his texts. Recognizing the meaning of nonsense games or problems is not an easy task, and this thesis is meant to analyze them, explaining their significance and intention. Correspondingly with those ideas, a nonsense text leads the reader to improve his or her shrewdness to interpret the text and, at the same time, the reader will advance intellectually beyond the boring axioms where we are used to live in. Lewis Carroll used many complex and convoluted logic problems in his texts, thus, his texts are an excellent example to escape from those axioms.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (from now on, Lewis Carroll) was born on the 27th of January, 1832, in the village of Daresbury, Cheshire, England. He is better known by his pen name, Lewis Carroll. This pseudonym was used for the first time in his work *The Train*, published in March, 1856 (Lennon 11). He had three brothers and seven sisters, and all of them survived into adulthood. When Lewis Carroll was eleven, he and his family moved to Croft-on-Tees, a village in the Richmondshire district of North Yorkshire, also in England (Douglas-Fairhurst 28). He was a Reverend, logician, mathematician, photographer and British writer and, indeed, he was a lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford, for many years (Lennon 13). He died on the 14th of January, 1898, at his sisters' home in Guildford, a large city in Surrey, England (12).

Many changes were happening in England during the years that Lewis Carroll was alive. He lived almost all his life during the Victorian Era. The reign of the Queen Victoria lasted from the 20th of June, 1837, until her death, on the 22th of January, 1901. This period of time in the history of England was marked by the big expansion of the British Empire (Pollard 199). Moreover, the Victorian Era was characterized by the Revolution of 1846 (Halevy 103) and the European Revolution in 1848 (236). The Victorian Era was a remarkable period of important changes, including social and economic developments together with technological innovations.

The young Carroll began his education in his own house and ever since he was a little boy, he developed a strong interest in mathematics (Moses 8). In 1851, young Lewis Carroll became a Student of Christ Church at Oxford University. He was not nineteen years old yet,

and “from that time to the day of his death his name was always associated with the fine old building which was his *Alma Mater*” (42). Lewis Carroll graduated in 1854, obtaining the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Three years after, in 1857, he became a Master of Arts at the University of Oxford (54).

Once Lewis Carroll finished his studies at Oxford, he became a teacher at Oxford University. Then, while he was teaching, he wrote his famous books about Alice, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), commonly shortened to *Alice in Wonderland* (Douglas-Fairhurst 3), and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Both books are considered as “part of the background of every educated Englishman and American” (Phillips ix). *Alice in Wonderland* has been one of the “world’s most frequently translated works” (Guiliano xi), actually, it has been translated in more than fifty-five languages. After Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll is possibly “the world’s most quoted author” (Phillips ix). *Alice in Wonderland* became so popular at the time that Lewis Carroll had to write a second part a few years after.

Both Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear (1812-1888), two Victorian writers, were “responsible for the development of an innovative and intelligent literature for children” (Lemos 24). However, thinking that *Alice in Wonderland* was the first book that Lewis Carroll wrote for children is “a great mistake” in the words of Stuart Dodgson Collingwood (1). Carroll already wrote some pieces of work to entertain his siblings when he was just a little boy. After that, he did not stop writing. Lewis Carroll wrote other great works, for instance, *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), *The Game of Logic* (1887), *Sylvie and Bruno* (published in 1889) and *Symbolic Logic* (1896). All of them were addressed to a “wide general audience and, quite explicitly, to children” (Bartley 5). But, even though Carroll’s texts were written to please children, it does not mean that those works are not interesting for adults. Logical puzzles, symbolism and philosophical question are a key part of his work.

In order to analyze and arrange all these ideas, this thesis is divided into four chapters. To begin with, the following chapter introduces and explains the concept of the literary nonsense genre according to some authors and critics. Once the concept of literary nonsense has been examined, a different chapter analyzes deeper the application of literary nonsense and explains the connection between that concept and the works of Lewis Carroll, disclosing, meantime, the application of Carroll’s knowledge in logic and mathematics into his nonsense works *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. The third chapter goes into more details of Lewis Carroll’s works, hence, it

develops the nonsense genre expressed through characters and symbolism in Carroll's books about Alice. The conclusion restates the main argument and recapitulates the thesis of the essay and the main ideas which support the argument.

2. The Nonsense Genre

The term “nonsense” is a “relatively recent phenomenon in literature, originating in Britain in the Romantic and post-Romantic era” (Tigges 3). According to Holbrook Jackson, “the literature of nonsense has grown in quality as well as quantity” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (ix) and, still today, nonsense literature is growing, as we can find many new writers who are fans of this genre. Despite the abandonment of sense, the Victorian public did enjoy the hilarious rhymes, pictures and texts of different nonsense writers, and even today, readers still appreciate these nonsense texts.

Defining the concept of “nonsense” is not an easy task. There have been some attempts but, in fact, there is not a “clear theoretical consensus” (Tigges 1). Anyhow, there are many writers who are defined as “nonsense writers”, sometimes by themselves and sometimes by others. For instance, three of these nonsense writers are Edward Lear who wrote the *Book of Nonsense* (1846), Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), and the famous musician John Lennon, who wrote a nonsensical book called *In His Own Write* (1964). These works share some characteristics of the literary nonsense genre and, even though there is not a consensus of the meaning of nonsense, it is possible to describe and analyze those aspects.

A definition of “nonsense” is a number of “words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas” and a second definition is nonsense as a “language without meaning” (Tigges 9). This definition means that, on the one hand, it is possible to find a text classified as a nonsense text if it is composed of ideas without any sense in the real life, for example, “you are not yourself” or “drive faster, so you’ll stay at the same place.” On the other hand, a nonsense text could consist of ideas with no meaning, using words that do not exist, for instance, “tomorrow, there will be a biliadous cake for the cuvudaley party.”

According to the first definition, a nonsense text which uses some ridiculous ideas results in a text which will make the reader think about why what is written in the text is not logical or why the meaning of it is ridiculous. For example, if the text states “you are not yourself,” the reader will try to understand why that idea is absurd: can you not be yourself? What happens when you die, are you yourself or not? Clearly, a nonsense text based on this definition will make the reader think further about the sense of reality than a text which entails some, or more, “sense”.

Furthermore, it is possible that, after reading a nonsense text, the reader will learn more about reality than after reading a “sense text” or a text which is not classified as a

nonsense text. Reading romantic stories is excellent for entertainment, but everybody knows how love works or, at least, most people can experience love in their real lives. But nonsense tales go further than that. The reader of a nonsense text must understand reality and also the logic of the real world. That is to say, how reality works. It is easy to understand what we see everyday, such as the day and the night or how a seed becomes a flower, without even thinking much about it. Being more accurate, these quotidian facts are recorded in our brains as axioms in our regular days. But a reader of a nonsense text must understand further, thinking about the logic of the real world and, at the same time, about the world beyond it, the one that we do not see or experience every day.

Regarding the second definition, a text composed of language with no meaning using, for instance, coined words, will make, consequently, the imagination and ingenuity of the reader flow even more than reading other types of texts. Using the previous example, “tomorrow, there will be a biliadous cake for the cuvudaley party,” the reader should consider all the possibilities to be able to understand the meaning of “biliadous” or “cuvudaley”. After connecting that specific nonsense phrase with the later ones which are written along the text, the reader will obtain one or more conclusions about the spirit of the text. Or maybe not.

Nonsense literature is always open to the reader’s imagination and it is very pleasing to have the opportunity to read texts that are created to develop the creativity and wisdom of the reader. Texts should not be exclusively to describe reality, because the art of creating literature does not work like other subjects, for instance mathematics.

In addition, a language, such as English, is always in continuous progress, enriching itself with new words. It is well known that Shakespeare introduced many new words to the English language through his texts. Sometimes, those words had already been used in oral language, but they were never written before. However, in other cases, Shakespeare just invented new words, for example, by creating a new noun from an existing verb. Consequently, “coinages were an important component of the persistent belief that Shakespeare’s vocabulary dwarfed all others in size, variety, and creativity” (Ward 49).

Together with the previous ideas, many readers could think that a text has no value if the reader does not recognize the message, or thoughts, that the author meant to express with the text. Other readers, in the meantime, could assume that there is no reason to read a text if they do not find out the author’s ideas, or purpose.

According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), one of the major theorists associated with post-structuralism, a critical reading must create a text because “there is nothing outside of the text” (Barry 66). Derrida explains in *Of Grammatology*:

The writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper systems, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them by only letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is not a certain quantitative distribution of shadow and light, of weakness or of force but a signifying structure that critical reading should *produce*. (158)

Peter Barry explains Derrida’s somewhat complex idea. Derrida means that the reader should deconstruct a text instead of reconstruct it, so the reader must build up his or her own version of what is written in the text. Consequently:

“Reading and interpretation, then, are not just *reproducing* what the writer thought and expressed in the text. This inadequate notion of interpretation Derrida calls a ‘doubling commentary’, since it tries to reconstruct a pre-existing, non-textual reality (of what the writer did or thought) to lay alongside the text.” (Barry 67)

On the one hand, the messages or ideas written in the text could be many, and it is the reader’s task to uncover them while reading it. It is not essential that the reader discover the point of view of the author; it is enough that the reader enhances his own knowledge through the reading of the new text by building his or her own conclusions. On the second hand, the purpose of nonsense authors could be many. Firstly, to make the reader think about the logic of the tangible world, or even the absence of logic in it, and consider the significance of the abstract world. Secondly, the intention could be to entertain the reader with new ideas, such as weird concepts, hilarious theories or using bizarre pictures. Thirdly, the author perhaps simply wants to write a text due to a personal purpose, without thinking of the reader in particular, expressing his thoughts or getting some income. Most of the time, the reader does not know the author’s reasons for writing a new book unless he or she read an interview with him explaining those reasons and, anyhow, what the writer says in the interview could not be even true. And, indeed, there are no differences between nonsense authors and the others. Does the

reader really know the purpose of those authors of texts which are not classified as “nonsense texts”? After all, these conclusions could be extrapolated to all types of writers.

Going further from the previous ideas, nonsense texts use common language. And language is “a rule-governed communication system”. A communication system is “a system that people use to exchange information to each other”, and to be able to exchange information, there should be common rules that all those people who want to communicate must know and dominate. In brief, “when a system is based on rules that its users know and follow, it is called a *rule-governed system*” (Valli and Lucas 1) and without these rules, communication is not possible. A nonsense text, even though it transmits nonsense ideas, uses a common language, because there is no other way to transmit information.

There are many major subfields, or levels, of linguistics. Four of them are phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics (Valli and Lucas 2). According to Lecercle, “nonsense texts treat those levels as natural.” The nonsense texts can be easily analyzed along those levels because “they seem spontaneously to conform to them.” In line with these ideas, Lecercle holds that the texts written by nonsense authors “use these levels to play with them as natural objects” (27). A nonsense text may lack regular syntax or it may lack morphology according to the established standard of the language. And, it is possible that, after reading a nonsense text, the reader does not understand enough. This could be, following Lecercle’s ideas, because of semantics reasons, or because of the inclusion of coined words (28). An example of a text that uses coined words is the poem “Jabberwocky” (Appendix 1), the nonsense poem written by Lewis Carroll: “Come to my arms, my beamish boy! / O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” The words “beamish”, “frabjous”, “Callooh!” and “ Callay!” are coined words and, still today, they are not listed in an English dictionary.

The concepts “coinage” and “neologism” are synonyms. Neologisms are defined as “new words or phrases (also called nonce words) or new usages.” Ergo, those words which become established in a language are no longer consider neologisms (Greenbaum 473). It is not necessary to create a new word, or neologism, by positioning the different letters in a certain way to form a completely new word unit which does not exist yet, because, for example, it is also possible to produce a neologism by shifting the meaning of a preexisting word. Using this type of neologism would make the reading of the nonsense text even more abstract and, therefore, the imagination of the reader will grow much more. But, because the interpretation of a text is completely open, especially in a nonsense text, it may not be easy to reach an agreement regarding the meaning of a coined word which has been used in a

nonsense text. Actually, the term neology frequently entails dissent of their novelty by other writers “wherever they appear” (Redfern 183).

Lewis Carroll created many absurd or ridiculous ideas in his texts and, also, coined words. Moreover, Carroll used nonsense anecdotes and tales to introduce the reader to his logical problems that, mostly, do not have an apparent solution. The reader, according to his or her own criteria, should analyze why these illogical problems are not rational and concluding, in the end, reaching a meaning, and a reason, of those problems. After that, the reader will be able to continue reading by discovering the plot of the text. The following chapter examines in detail some examples which can be found in Carroll’s books *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

3. Carroll's Choice and Application of the Nonsense Genre

Following an entry in the diary of Lewis Carroll, on the 4th of July, 1862: "I made an expedition up the river to Godstow with the three Liddells; we had tea on the bank there and did not reach Christ Church until half-past eight" (Woolcott 1). Carroll had taken a day off and spent it with the small daughters of the Dean of Christ Church, Henry Liddell: Lorina Charlotte, Alice, and Edith (Phillips 4). On the 4th of July, 1865, exactly three years after the decisive row up the river, Miss Alice Liddell received the first presentation copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* signed by Lewis Carroll (Collingwood 104).

Alice Liddell was born in Westminster in 1852. She was a friend of Lewis during her childhood and she was his inspiration for the main character in the books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Alice Liddell was thirteen years old when the first book of Alice was presented to her.

Lewis Carroll included a poem of seven stanzas, "All in the golden afternoon," in the beginning of the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* which tells the adventures of that 4th of July, 1865, during the boat trip with the three sisters. According to the second stanza, the three little girls beg Carroll to tell them a tale and, because of this reason, this day is documented as the day of the gestation of the tales about Alice. The final stanza is a dedication to Alice Liddell:

Alice! A childish story take,
And, with a gentle hand,
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined
In Memory's mystic band.
Like pilgrim's wither'd wreath of flowers
Pluck'd in a far-off land. (Carroll 12)

Lewis writes about the tale in the third stanza of the opening poem that "there will be nonsense in it!" (11). Actually, a few years after both books about Alice were published, Lewis Carroll asked a little girl if she had read his books about Alice, and her answer was: "Oh yes, I've read both of them, and I think," (this more slowly and thoughtfully) "I think 'Through the Looking-Glass' is more stupid than 'Alice's Adventures.' Don't you think so?" (Collingwood 106). This dialogue suggests that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* can be both included within the

literary genre of nonsense. Carroll produced in his books of Alice both ridiculous ideas and, at the same time, words without any meaning.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland begins when Alice is getting “tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do” (Carroll 15). Her sister is reading a book “without pictures or conversations” (15), so she is getting very bored. Suddenly, a White Rabbit with a waistcoat and a watch appears next to her saying “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” (16). Alice follows the White Rabbit through his rabbit-hole. The rabbit-hole turns out to be a very deep tunnel and, unexpectedly, it becomes a very deep well without any support. Alice falls down for a long time, or “either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly” (16). At the end of her fall, without hurting herself, Alice enters a world of logical absurdities and some paradoxes, a world that she calls “the antipathies” (17).

As we can see, just in the very beginning of the story, Carroll used a nonsense description of reality: “Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly” (16). Anyhow, this idea makes the reader think about the logic of that sentence. Can anybody fall very slowly? It actually depends on the space-time relationship of the new world of Alice. The very laws of physics are missing here. By any means, it is a reader’s task to interpret the story according to his own version of what is written in the text.

Along the seventh chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, there is another example of nonsense which is related to time. During the mad tea-party, the Hatter asks “What day of the month is it?” and Alice responds to him “The fourth”. Therefore, the Hatter sighs “Two days wrong!” according to his watch. Because of that answer, Alice thinks that the Hatter owns a very funny watch, as it is a watch that “tells the day of the month, and doesn’t tell what o’clock it is!” (Carroll 70). Actually, it is always six o’clock at the mad tea-party place, so “it’s always tea-time,” according to the words of Hatter (73). Consequently, it does not make any sense to possess a watch which tells you the hours, it is a better idea to own a watch which marks the days. Or maybe not. Furthermore, in this same chapter, Alice notices that, indeed, time is not trustworthy in Wonderland:

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

“If you knew Time as well as I do,” said the Hatter, “you wouldn’t talk about wasting *it*. It’s *him*.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Alice.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!” (71)

Time is, thus, not an abstruse “it”, rather time is a masculine “him”. The reader has the possibility to interpret the described concept of time as he or she would like to. One possible interpretation of Lewis’ concept of Time is the following: Time is treated in the above text as a real person, that is the reason why the Hatter says that Alice never “spoke to Time”. Actually, a person who lives in the real world is influenced by Time constantly and, somehow, this person should be able to communicate and interact with the embodied concept of Time at any time, for example, by speaking with Time –as the Hatter suggested. Anyhow, a nonsense text could be elucidated according to the reader’s will. There is not an absolute truth to understand a nonsense text and, indeed, nonsense texts actually facilitate the way so the imagination of the reader flows as much as the reader prefers.

There are other examples of nonsense along the tale. For instance, when Alice meets the Caterpillar. The Caterpillar tries to find out who Alice is. Once the Caterpillar asks Alice “Who are you?” Alice says “I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (48). The Caterpillar tries to get a better answer, so then Alice keeps saying: “I ca’n’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, Sir, [...] because I’m not myself, you see” (49). Hence, when a person changes for any reason, is he or she himself/herself? Or after those changes, is the “new” person something else? It is well-known that a person, after ten years on the average, has changed absolutely all his or her own cells along those years, so “am I the same myself who I was ten years ago?” Again, this is Carroll’s paradox which, consequently, makes the reader think about the sense of that absurdity.

In the sentence “I’m not myself, you see” (49), Lewis Carroll used a number of words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas. This is the first definition of nonsense genre which was described in the previous chapter. But, Carroll also used language without meaning, which is the second definition of nonsense literature provided previously. His poem “Jabberwocky” is a prime example of this category.

“Jabberwocky” is a nonsense poem which is included in the book *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (see Appendix 1). This tale came six years after *Alice in Wonderland*, and it is “one of those rare sequels in literature that lives up to the expectations established by the initial volume” (Guiliano xiv). *Through the Looking-Glass* is

not a sequel of the first book about Alice, rather a new tale where Alice is in a different land enjoying new adventures (xiv). It was indeed, Queen Victoria, after reading the first book about Alice, who suggested that Carroll “dedicate his next book to her” (Woolcott 4). The relation between Queen Victoria and Carroll was not the best one at that time (actually, the character of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is used as a criticism towards Her Majesty) and, because of that reason, “his next book was a mathematical opus entitled *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*” (4).

The poem “Jabberwocky” is about the killing of a creature called “the Jabberwock”. There are many coined words in this poem. For instance: “O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” As stated earlier, the word “frabjous” is a coined word, hence, this word did not have a meaning until Carroll used it. Therefore, the reader must decide a certain signification, or maybe more than one, in order to be able to follow the reading.

In the second chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, there is a famous occurrence which involves both the Red Queen and Alice. It describes Alice and the Red Queen running really fast for some time. During the race, the Red Queen, constantly asks Alice to run faster and faster and, once they stop, Alice asks: “Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!” (Carroll 152). After this question, the Red Queen answers Alice: “Of course it is.” So, the Red Queen tells Alice that they are running simply to stay in the same place. Alice, after the Queen’s answer, says:

“Well, in *our* country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you run very fast for a long time as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”
(152)

Again, there is a nonsense idea. Is it possible to run very fast to stay in the same place? Well, if all the things around you move at the same time, maybe you are at the same place. But, if you run twice as fast as that, maybe you do not stay at the same place. Everything depends on your surroundings. Moreover, the Earth is moving very fast all the time, thus, we cannot be ever at the same place, is that right? The reader should take into consideration his or her own

thoughts and the laws of physics and, perhaps, he or she would achieve a conclusion, or maybe not.

The books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, as described in this chapter, are full of nonsense problems. But, Lewis Carroll also used the characters of his books to express nonsense. The following chapter focuses on the details of those characters and how the nonsense and absurd ideas flow through their characteristics and adventures.

4. The Nonsense Genre expressed through Characters and Symbolism

Lewis Carroll was the creator of many famous characters, for example, the Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon. Some of the features of these characters make nonsense in Lewis Carroll's texts but, anyhow, he eloquently used his creations to be able to develop his tales. At the same time, he used these characters to explain logic in his book *Symbolic Logic* (1896). For example, there are popular crocodiles and frogs in Carroll's novel *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) and, in *Symbolic Logic*, as William Warren Bartley explains, there is a "moving logical paradox about a hungry crocodile and a delectable baby". *Symbolic Logic* is an "eccentric logic textbook" that, still today, is read by many students of logic (3).

As stated above, the characters of Carroll have certain features, or physical descriptions, which make little sense. There are, for instance, the grin of the Cheshire Cat, the waistcoat of the White Rabbit or the big hat of the Hatter. The reader, on the one hand, could think that Carroll selected these aspects of the characters randomly but, on the other hand, the reader could find his own logic in these things. Furthermore, it is also possible to express nonsense ideas through the qualities of the characters which make up a novel. For example, the ability to disappear, the capacity to run and stay in the same place all the time or the power of switching places at any time. These physical descriptions and qualities can be categorized as symbols which can be accepted as representations of nonsense ideas.

Lewis Carroll used many nonsense ideas through the characters of his books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. The main character of these two tales is Alice, the girl who grows and shrinks throughout the stories. For example, in the first chapter "Down the rabbit-hole", while Alice is following the White Rabbit, she finds a very small door which she needs to open. Alice gets the key to open the door, but she is much bigger than the door is. Then she discovers a bottle and she decides to drink what is inside. Because of that action, Alice shrinks and "she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through the little door into that lovely garden" (Carroll 21). After this, Alice finds out that she forgot the little key on the big table, so she needs to get bigger again in order to get the door key. She gets some cake which makes her grow. But, after all, she must shrink again in order to be able go through the door.

There could be many interpretations of this episode, hence, the reader of the tale should use his or her imagination to find out what happens to Alice. For example, a viable explanation is that a little girl has to be molded according to where she goes. A different

reason could be that Alice gets older as she advances in her adventures, as an allegory of the girl's passage from childhood to adolescence. Once Alice is in Wonderland, she leaves behind her own family and her own safe and comfortable life. In this new world, she has to face new experiences by herself without any help from relatives or friends. Due to these new adventures, Alice grows up and becomes mature, but not just at once: she grows up and shrinks constantly depending on her needs. Somehow, the reader can notice Alice's doubts and concerns during her journey in Wonderland. The process of becoming an adult is not effortless, so that is the reason why Alice, in some episodes of the tale, gets confused and baffled, as it could happen to any other girl of her age. At any case, the possibilities of understanding these ideas are open to the reader's imagination.

Another well-known character is the White Rabbit, who is wearing a waistcoat. This character is always running late: "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" (16). The reader could ask himself why the White Rabbit wears a waistcoat. Maybe, to distinguish the age of the White Rabbit, probably, as much older than Alice. Alice represents youth, and the White Rabbit symbolizes the old age. Alice, who is very curious, chases the White Rabbit, possibly because she wants to learn from the knowledge of the White Rabbit.

The large blue Caterpillar is introduced in the fourth chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The fifth chapter, called "Advice from a Caterpillar," describes a conversation between the Caterpillar and Alice. During that conversation, the Caterpillar does not stop smoking a long hookah while he is seated on a mushroom. "[A]t last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice" (48). This episode, perhaps, is an allusion to drugs use, but maybe not. Again, Carroll used a character in his books about Alice to express nonsense.

In the following chapter, called "Pig and Pepper", there is the introduction of a new character, the Cheshire Cat. This is a cat depicted with a broad fixed grin, which is described as follows: "The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had *very* long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect" (64). The Cheshire Cat has the ability to disappear, even though its grin does not vanish at the same time than its body. Alice thinks that this Cheshire Cat's talent is very interesting because, as she thinks, she has often seen a cat without a grin "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" (67). Moreover, the cat also poses philosophical questions and logical problems to Alice and, consequently, she gets irritated and

confused. For instance, the Cheshire Cat tries to convince Alice with the idea that both of them are mad:

“In *that* direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction”, waving the other paw, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they’re both mad.”

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you ca’n’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Alice didn’t think that proved it at all: however, she went on: “And how do you know that you’re mad?”

“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” (65-66).

It is very interesting to think about the meaning of being mad. How can a person be aware of his or her own craziness? Furthermore, a person can be diagnosed as crazy by a different person; but who is able to guarantee that the person who determines the craziness of another person is not crazy as well? By any means, everything is relative and nothing is certain. Again, Carroll, through his writing, leads the reader to analyze his complex ideas.

The seventh chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, titled “A Mad Tea-Party” could be also interpreted as criticism of the upper class during the English Victorian era, where those members of the social upper class used to spend a lot of time talking nonsense during tea-time, oblivious to the misfortunes of other social classes. In this chapter, Alice finds “a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare and the Hatter were having tea at it: a Dormouse was sitting between them, fast asleep, and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head” (68). Perhaps, the Dormouse represents the boredom of these tea-meetings. The Hatter, instead, has the

ability of switching places on the tea-table at any time. Regarding the March Hare, Alice thinks, before meeting him, that he “will be much the most interesting, and perhaps, as this is May, it w’on’t be raving mad—at least not so mad as it was in March” (66). The reason why the Hatter and the March Hare are stuck at the tea time, six pm, is that the Queen of Hearts sentenced the Hatter to death for “murdering the time” (72) after the Hatter tried to sing a song at her celebration. The Hatter was not beheaded though but, instead, he was condemned to be always stuck at six pm. Consequently, both the Hatter and the March Hare are mad, because they have been doing the same things over and over for a long time.

One of the most interesting characters in the novel *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is the Queen of Hearts. She is introduced in the novel in the chapter titled as “The Queen’s Croquet Ground.” In this episode, Alice comes upon three gardeners who are painting the roses on a rose-tree red. The roses were originally white, but the Queen of Hearts does not like white roses, hence, the gardeners, afraid of being beheaded, are painting all the roses red before the Queen notices this mistake. The Queen of Hearts is recognized because of her well-known phrase “Off with their heads!” The Queen unceasingly repeats these words along the story, therefore, everyone in the tale is afraid of her. But, what is the meaning and purpose of constantly frightening people with the concept of cutting off their heads? Probably, none. The Queen of Hearts, besides taking absurd decisions, is the character who has the power to rule a nation and, supposedly, a monarch should be calm and sane. Instead, the Queen of Hearts is apparently crazy, like other characters in the novel. It seems that Lewis Carroll used the general nonsense of his book to imply the senseless attitude of the Queen of Hearts who, actually, could be a caricature of the Queen Victoria and a critique of her reign.

At the beginning of the novel *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll introduced a chess problem: “White Pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves” (125). Actually, chess is the base of the plot of the tale. In the second chapter, called “The Garden of Live Flowers,” both Alice and the Red Queen run all the time to merely stay in the same place, as discussed earlier. They both are part of a chessboard, hence, they cannot go very far. By any means, the interpretation of the connection between the chess game and the plot of the story is open to the reader’s analysis.

There are, indeed, more examples of nonsense in the features and adventures of the characters of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. But, this time, it will be the reader of this essay’s task to discover the nonsense ideas and deconstruct

the text in order to determine the new logic of the characters, reaching more conclusions about the core of both texts. Or maybe not.

5. Conclusion

A nonsense text improves the reader's astuteness and wisdom and, simultaneously, the reader advances intellectually overcoming the boring axioms which surround us in our day to day lives. To be able to analyze a text and make new conclusions is not always a simple task. The reader, after reading a nonsense text, must interpret the meaning of it by himself, without trying to find out the intention of the writer. Lewis Carroll was a nonsense writer who used many sophisticated logic problems in his books, hence, his texts are an attractive example to break with those axioms.

The term "nonsense" is a fairly recent phenomenon in literature. There are two definitions of nonsense. On the one hand, a definition of nonsense is a number of words conveying absurd or ridiculous ideas and, on the other hand, nonsense could be defined as a language without meaning using, for instance, words which do not exist. Consequently, and according to the first definition, a nonsense text which uses ridiculous ideas will make the reader think about its meaning and its sense or why what is written in the text is not logical or sounds ridiculous. Regarding the second definition, a text composed of coined words, this is, language with no meaning, will make the imagination and ingenuity of the reader progress while building the sense and the plot of the story.

Following the previous ideas, some readers could consider that it is pointless to read a text if it is not easy to understand the author's ideas. Anyhow, and according to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, a critical reading must create a text because "there is nothing outside of the text" (Barry 66).

Lewis Carroll created many absurd and ridiculous ideas in his texts, for example, with the introduction of illogical and unsolved problems. Additionally, he created many coined words, building up, even more, the nonsense of his texts. Particularly, there are many examples of these unsolved problems in Carroll's books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*.

One of those examples is described in a famous passage of the tale *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice, following the White Rabbit through his rabbit-hole, enters a world of logical absurdities and some paradoxes. The rabbit-hole turns out to be a very deep tunnel and, suddenly, it becomes a deep well. Alice falls down for a long time, or "either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly" (Carroll 16).

Through a similar way, Lewis Carroll also used the characters of his books to create nonsense ideas. The grin of the Cheshire Cat, the waistcoat of the White Rabbit, the big hat of the Hatter and the attitude of the Queen of Hearts are several examples. Moreover, the main character Alice has the ability to grow and shrink throughout the stories.

Deconstructing Carroll's text in order to reach new views of the real world increases the knowledge of the reader. The unsolved problems and the characters of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* help the reader in this complex task. Besides, it is definitely valid to assert that Carroll's logical problems are useful to understand further how the real world works, for example, through the understanding of physical laws, and also to discover the unreal world and the different possibilities which it offers. Or maybe not.

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Appendix: “Jabberwocky”, a nonsense poem written by Lewis Carroll.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

(Carroll 140)