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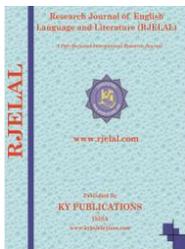
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## LACANIAN READING OF THE VICTORIAN TEXT LEWIS CAROLL'S *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*

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### ABSTRACT

Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in the year 1865 and since then it has never been out of print. It has since then been viewed by critics and scholars and many alternate readings and meanings have been given to this Victorian text. The novel has inspired various authors, movies, ballad, and computer games as well. There is even a syndrome that has been named Alice in Wonderland syndrome. The novel apparently appears to be a sweet illustrative adventure of a little girl named Alice, who follows a rabbit into its hole and discovers a fantastical Carrollian world of magic cakes, secret doors, hidden treasures, queen and king and a pack of cards and what not, only to find out in the end that it was all just a dream and nothing more!! But after Jacques Lacan gave his psychoanalytical theory, this children's text cannot be read as just a simple reading.

**Keyword:** Carroll, Lacanian theory, Freudian theory, psychoanalytic theory, children's text.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) is a prominent figure in the history of psychoanalysis and is often referred to as the 'French Freud'. His oeuvre is invaluable and has been used to read various texts under the psychoanalytical purview. The basic framework of his psychoanalytical theory holds three important stages: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. He associated the Imaginary phase with the stage of consciousness about one's own self and also about others. The Symbolic is suggestive of the institution of symbols and signs. It is actually linked to Saussurian concept that deals with the signifier and the signified. It refers to customs, laws, institutions, practices, rituals, cultural traditions and so on. The Real order is something which cannot be symbolized, because if it is symbolized, it will lose its reality.

*Alice in Wonderland* is a children's book about a young girl named Alice and one afternoon she feels bored while accompanying her sister on

the river bank. She notices a White Rabbit with a pocket watch and she finds this rabbit so peculiar and intriguing that she follows him and falls into the rabbit hole. This is an unusual place, and it is a long tunnel in which she is falling through. She finds a small key to a large door and an attractive garden!! There are magical things that happen with her. For instance, once she notices a small table with nothing kept on it and then, for the second time she discovers a bottle labelled "Drink Me" and this potion makes her shrink. She shrinks too little to even reach the table top. Then she finds a cake that has "Eat Me" written on it. Soon Alice grows to be bigger and bigger in size. Her tremendous size makes her unhappy and Alice starts crying and her tears make a pool in the hallway. Alice swims through her own tears and meets a mouse.

Alice feels so disoriented about herself that she wonders who she is. She thinks she has been changed for some other girls she knew. She starts recalling her Geography and Mathematics lessons and finally she comes to the conclusion that she might have been exchanged for a girl named, Mabel.

Further, Alice manages to swim to shore along with the other animals and particularly a mouse. In the woods, she runs into a White Rabbit, who mistakes Alice for his maid and sends her to fetch some things from the house. In the house she drinks a potion and becomes too huge and then finds a little cake which makes her small again. She runs out into the wood again and encounters a caterpillar sitting on a mushroom. The caterpillar advised her that the two sides of mushroom will increase or decrease her size as she wishes and with great difficulty, Alice manages to reach her proper height.

Trekking further, she gets inside the house of the Duchess where she met a footman of the livery. After engaging in meaningless argument for some while, Alice finally opened the door and entered and here again she found the attitudes of the cook and the duchess very inappropriate. Here she also met a cat that grinned. Alice asked about why her cat grins and the Duchess replied:

'It's a Cheshire cat,' said the Duchess, 'and that's why. Pig!' She said the last word with such sudden violence that Alice quite jumped; but she saw in another moment that it was addressed to the baby, and not to her, so she took courage, and went on again— (Carroll, pp 62)

The cook and the Duchess battle fiercely and seem unconcerned about the baby that the Duchess is nursing. The child kept on grunting and when Alice took him in the woods it turned into a pig and trotted away!! Alice enters March Hare's house and enters into a Mad Tea Party and here she meets March Hare, the Hatter and the Dormouse. All the creatures here are very argumentative and annoying and have a rude behaviour towards one another that certainly lacks in respect. Alice gets tired of being insulted and leaves the tea party.

She walks away and enters a beautiful garden which belongs to the Queen of Hearts. Here, three gardeners are painting the white roses red, because the Queen hates white roses and if she finds out that there are white roses in the garden, she will have them 'beheaded'!! Soon a procession of cards, King, Queen and the White Rabbits appear. The Queen at once appears a difficult figure to please and she keeps on ordering, "Off with his head" (Carroll, pp 82, 83) whenever she is slightest dissatisfied with any subject. Alice is invited to play croquet, which eventually ends in chaos.

Alice attends a trial of the Knave of Hearts because he is accused of stealing the tarts that the Queen made. Alice, who is appalled by the proceedings, is also called as a witness and the Queen orders- "Sentence first- verdict afterwards" (Carroll, pp 121). The novel ends on the note that Alice:

...gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister... (Carroll, pp 121)

It is an established fact that the muse for Lewis Carroll's adventure book was Alice Liddell, a ten year old daughter of Lewis' friend, Henry Liddell. One afternoon, as the three Liddell sisters rowed the boat with Carroll that this story idea came up. The girls loved it and Alice Liddell asked Carroll to write the story for him. Though it sounds simple, but it is believed among the literary circles that the relationship between Carroll and the three girls was not one of decent friendship. Though there is nothing on record to suspect of any fling, but "it's hard not to view as suspect a grown man who enjoyed having his young playmates sit on his lap and pose for photographs, often under-dressed" (Anderson). He often made these young girls, his subject for photography. "In one, Alice Liddell was photographed with loose-fitting clothes slipping off of her shoulders. In others, there were drawings of young girls in the nude, lounging by the sea. The most troubling picture of all, though, was one that Carroll kept hidden in his private collection until years after his death. It was a full-body photograph of Alice's sister, Lorina, still too young to have gone through

puberty, stripped completely naked" (Oliver). With such inspirations behind writing this novel, the text cannot be read as simply whimsical.

It would be relevant to open the psychoanalytic analysis of *Alice in Wonderland* with Phyllis Stowell's explanation of the text that says,

Like all children, Alice must separate herself from identification with others, develop an ego, become aware of aggression (her own and others'), and learn to tolerate adversity without succumbing to self-pity...In other words, Alice has to grow up. (Stowell)

Alice is a young girl, who has to learn to grow up. When taking Freudian concept of psychoanalytical theory, Alice is shown developing a superego. This means becoming conscious of the social norms in a manner that they ultimately become part of the subconscious. She is shown to be in a stage of Id when the novel opens, a primitive, inherited stage of a human being that responds immediately to basic urges and desires. The second stage of psychoanalytic development is the Ego, which according to Freud is "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (Freud). Ego works by reason, neither by primal desires nor by the social norms.

The rabbit hole, when re-examined, has a gynaecological imagery when the text is given a psychoanalytical reading. It is symbolic of phallic penetration. Mention of locks and keys right in the beginning of the text can be read as implying coitus, virginity and loss of virginity, and the caterpillar implying the phallus connections. A.M.E. Goldschmidt interprets these locks and keys in the following words:

Here we find the common symbolism of lock and key representing coitus; the doors of normal size represent adult women. These are disregarded by the dreamer and the interest is centered on the little door, which symbolizes a female child; the curtain before it represents the child's clothes. (Goldschmidt, pp 281)

The large pool of salt water has been given different connotations by different readers. "Shedding gallons of tears" (Carroll, pp 25) "drowned in my own tears" (Carroll, pp 29); and her voice becoming hoarse have sexual connotations and pubescent connotations respectively. William Empson in *Alice in Wonderland: The Child as Swain* suggests "the pool of tears represents both the primeval sea from which life arose and amniotic fluid" (Empson, pp 255).

After she has stopped crying, and has let out all the salty water, Alice starts 'shrinking', which is again implying the satisfaction of sexual urge and decreasing of the penal size. Alice says, "I so wish they *would* put their heads down" (Carroll. pp 28) is another erotic statement in the text and in fact, her emphasis on "I am so *very* tired of being all alone here" (Carroll. pp 28) is suggestive of the act of masturbation. Alice was shrinking to an abnormal size when she realized that "this was because of the fan she was holding" (Carroll. pp 28) and she dropped it instantly, here 'fanning' is related to swiftly and lightly brushing something and this something is significant of the sexual organs.

Throughout the text, Alice has been feeling uncomfortable about her size and body, because of the constant changes in size. The growing and shrinking is indicative of two things: one is the phallus and second is the changes that one undergoes during puberty. It would not be wrong to say that this might be because Lewis Carroll was writing about this adventure story for Alice Liddell and her sisters, who were all in their age of puberty and he probably had sexual leanings towards the girls.

The conversation between Alice and Tweedledee about Red King is another point that shows phallic connotations while writing the piece of literature:

"I'm afraid he'll catch cold with lying on the damp grass," said Alice, who was a very thoughtful little girl. "He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about?" Alice said, "Nobody can guess that." "Why, about you!" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. "And if he left off dreaming

about you, where do you suppose you'd be?" "Where I am now, of course," said Alice. "Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!" (Carroll, 183)

The Red King was lying on the damp grass, and dreaming, and then Tweedledee said that the Red King is dreaming about Alice, all these when read as Freudian concepts are suggestive of eroticism. Joseph C. Solomon in his study, 'Alice and the Red King — The Psycho-Analytic View of Existence' dissects clinically Alice as a dream of Red King. He relates it to an experience by one of his patients and postulates his theory that the Red King "represents the projected thoughts of a little girl into the mind of a powerful father-person" (65). This can also be understood as the projected thoughts of the young Liddell girls in the mind of Lewis Carroll.

Carroll has taken the advantage of innocence and a nonsensical style of literary writing to bring out Alice in Wonderland as a children's classic but William Empson, a famed literary critic rightly declared that Alice is

"A father in getting down the hole, a foetus at the bottom, and can only be born by becoming a mother and producing her own amniotic fluid"(Empson)

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