



Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*

(1871)

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Genre: Novel, Young Adult. Country: England.

After the success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll announced already in 1866 that he was planning a sequel but did not start to work on the project until two years later. He then started to look for an illustrator; Tenniel initially refused to illustrate another book for Carroll, but was eventually persuaded to do it. He had much more influence than during the first set of illustrations for *Alice's Adventures* in making suggestions with regard to the omission of a whole chapter. After her encounter with the White Knight in Chapter 8, Alice was to meet "The Wasp in a Wig". Tenniel found that the chapter didn't "interest [him] in the least" (Gardner 297; facsimile reproduction of Tenniel's letter to Carroll from June 1, 1870) and that Carroll should shorten the book. The galley proofs of the suppressed chapter were sold at Sotheby's in 1974, and the chapter as such was first published in 1977. The book was first published at Christmas in 1871 (dated 1872).

The figure of Alice links the two books; however, it has been suggested that Alice Liddell was not the only inspiration for the sequel of *Wonderland*, but that another Alice, Dodgson's, i.e. Carroll's little cousin Alice Raikes, was also involved:

Dodgson gave her an orange and asked her in which hand she was holding it. When she said "The right," he invited her to stand before the mirror and tell him in which hand the girl in the looking-glass held the orange. "The left hand," came the puzzled reply. "Exactly," agreed Dodgson, "and how do you explain that?" "If I was on the *other* side of the glass," said Alice Raikes, "wouldn't the orange still be in my right hand?" "Well done, little Alice," replied Dodgson, "the best answer I've had yet" (Hudson 20-21).

This incident is regarded to have been the source of the idea of going through the looking-glass and thus entering a strange country beyond it.

The narrative, i.e. Alice's dream, like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, consists of twelve chapters and is not only preceded (like its predecessor) but also concluded by a poem. It is structured by a game of chess that, however, does not follow the rules strictly but serves more as a demonstration of how to 'queen' a pawn (cf. Taylor 368). Martin Gardner elaborates extensively on the chess game in *Looking-Glass* in his *Annotated Alice* (137-41; see also Davies; Dickins).

The framing poems contain reminiscences of the first *Alice*-book: "A tale begun in other days, / When summer suns were glowing" (139). In the concluding poem, an acrostic of "Alice Pleasance Liddell", Carroll lays

particular stress on the passing of time since the first story of Alice was told: “Long has paled that sunny sky: / Echoes fade and memories die: / Autumn frosts have slain July” (287). But although he expresses this melancholy view, Carroll still emphasises the eternal quality of the story through the process of narrating: “Children yet, the tale to hear, / Eager eye and willing ear, / Lovingly shall nestle near” (287). The poem furthermore highlights the question that can be regarded as a sort of *leitmotif*, especially of Carroll’s later writings: “Life, what is it but a dream?” (287). This question reappears in the *Sylvie and Bruno* books and quite often occurs in his poetry (see Černý).

At the beginning of the story, Alice is inside the house, playing with her cat Dinah’s kittens, a black and a white one. It is winter, the day before Guy Fawkes, as she refers to bonfires that are being prepared, and it is snowing outside. While scolding the black kitten for undoing her worsted, she suddenly starts to reflect upon the room on the other side of the looking-glass: “She was up on the chimney-piece [...]. And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist. In another moment Alice was through the glass, and jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room” (149). She finds herself on the other side of the mirror and starts to look about her.

At first she discovers that, behind the mirror, everything is alive: the pictures on the wall, the face of the clock and the chessmen, which walk about in pairs. She then finds a book in mirror-writing and reads “Jabberwocky”, one of the most famous pieces of nonsense-poetry in the English language. Carroll had actually written an earlier version of the poem with the title “Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry”, published in the family magazine “Mischmasch” as early as 1855 (cf. Sutherland 35; 50-51), including the explanatory definitions given by Humpty Dumpty in the sixth chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass*.

This is the first instance of mirror reversals in the narrative. When she thinks that she has spent enough time in the house and tries to make her way to the garden, she always automatically ends up going back to the house, no matter which direction she walks to. After several attempts, she finds herself in front of a flower-bed with speaking flowers, in “The Garden of Live-Flowers” (chapter 2). The flowers tell her that someone else is walking about the garden, and very soon Alice meets the Red Queen. They walk to a hill together, and Alice gets a first overview of the country behind the looking-glass:

There were a number of tiny little brooks running straight across it from side to side, and the ground between was divided up into squares by a number of little green hedges, that reached from brook to brook. “I declare, it’s marked out just like a large chessboard!” (172).

The Red Queen invites her to join as a White Pawn and explains the game of chess to her, i.e. the respective moves she will have to make in order to become queen, which is Alice’s express wish.

Alice is first positioned in the second square; her first move, however, brings her two squares further (pawns are allowed to take two squares in the first move). She starts to run downhill and jumps over one brook, which brings her into a train where she meets several passengers, among them “a little voice” that, as it turns out, belongs to a gnat. The train subsequently jumps over the next brook, and Alice finds herself under a tree, together with the gnat who starts to present her with “Looking-Glass Insects”. Chapter 3 from that moment onwards is basically concerned with naming (as is the sixth chapter, when Alice meets Humpty Dumpty). Looking-glass insects are iconic in that their names stand for their appearance: the body of the Snap-dragon-fly is thus “made of plum-pudding, its wings of holly-leaves, and its head is a raisin burning in brandy” (183).

After the Gnat has sighed itself away — it is a very melancholic Gnat — Alice walks on and soon enters the wood where things have no names. Consequently, she forgets her name and cannot tell who she is when she meets a fawn. They walk through the wood together, “Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the fawn” (187). It is only when they leave the wood that they recognise each other and the fawn runs away

because Alice is a human child — the pre-linguistic harmonic state is ended by the appearance of language.

Alice next meets “Tweedledum and Tweedledee” in the fourth chapter. After a first introduction, Tweedledee recites “The Walrus and the Carpenter” to Alice, a poem about those two figures luring oysters to the beach, where they make dinner of them. While she still reflects upon the question whether the Walrus or the Carpenter is the worse of both characters, she is startled by a snoring sound: the Red King is sleeping underneath a tree. Tweedledee and Tweedledum claim that Alice exists only in the King’s dream and would vanish should he wake up. Carroll takes up this question again several times in the narrative, e.g. in the closing lines of the book and in the final stanza of the concluding poem. The question who actually dreams the story remains unanswered. The ending of the chapter is determined by the nursery rhyme about Tweedledum and Tweedledee who “decide to have a battle” because Tweedledum claims that his rattle has been destroyed. The action is ended by the appearance of a “monstrous crow” (189-90).

The following chapter starts with Alice meeting the White Queen who is in a dishevelled state and wants to take on Alice as her maid after having been assisted by her. During their conversation, Alice learns that the Queen’s “memory works both ways” (206), which means she can remember things that have not happened as yet. Together they cross the next brook and find themselves in a shop, where the Queen is, all of a sudden, transformed into a sheep who sits there knitting. This is not the only transformation in the fifth chapter “Wool and Water”: suddenly the knitting-needles turn into oars, and Alice is sitting in a boat, rowing. As unexpectedly as she found herself in the boat, Alice is back in the shop again and decides to buy an egg, which leads over to the next chapter and her encounter with “Humpty Dumpty”.

After claiming that words denote whatever Humpty Dumpty wants them to, meaning is hence determined by him, and, as he says, “The question is [...] which is to be master” (224). He eventually goes on to explain the vocabulary of the poem “Jabberwocky” to her, and he recites the nonsensical poem “I sent a message to the fish” (228-29) — one of the many in *Through the Looking-Glass* that is “about fishes” (285). Once more it is a nursery rhyme that determines the subsequent action: Humpty Dumpty sits on the wall, but eventually he “ha[s] a great fall, [and] all the King’s horses, and all the King’s men, couldn’t put Humpty Dumpty in his place again” (219): after his fall, at the beginning of the following chapter “The Lion and the Unicorn”, Alice sees “all the King’s horses” and soldiers run to Humpty Dumpty and next meets the White King who tells her that he “sent them all” (232) except for his two messengers, one of whom soon joins them. The messengers are called Haigha and Hatta — the March Hare and the Mad Hatter whom Alice already knows from her *Adventures in Wonderland* (cf. Gardner 235n4). When they arrive in town, Alice is presented to the Lion and Unicorn who have met to fight for the crown. The encounter ends on Alice serving the plum-cake — “Some gave them plum-cake” — and the Lion and the Unicorn being “drummed [...] out of town” (238).

While the noise of the drumming gradually fades, Alice is surprised by the arrival of the two knights who fight with each other. The White Knight wins over the Red one and accompanies Alice to the end of the square, presenting her with many of his inventions on the way (“It’s my own invention”). He has been considered as an inscription of Carroll into the story (cf. Gardner 248n2). The title page of *Through the Looking-Glass* shows the White Knight. Initially, Carroll had planned to use the print of the Jabberwock as the frontispiece and sent it to several mothers he knew as he was worried about its relative violence. Their response was unfavourable, and Tenniel produced a new picture of the White Knight (Jones and Gladstone 132-33).

At the end of the chapter, Alice leaps over the remaining brook and is finally ‘queened’. “Queen Alice” meets the other two Queens on the eighth square and is, first of all, invited to her own party and then examined by them in a nonsensical fashion. After a while, the White Queen and the Red Queen fall asleep and then disappear. Alice goes on to her party, where she is presented with food that is alive and which she is not allowed to eat.

The ending of Alice’s dream in *Through the Looking-Glass* is very similar to the conclusion of her adventures in

Wonderland: she simply refuses to play on and upsets the dinner-table, thereby getting hold of the Red Queen whom she starts to shake. “Shaking” leads over to “Waking”: these two short chapters contain the transformation of the Red Queen back into the black kitten. Alice finds herself back in the room where her dream began; like *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, her journey behind the looking-glass has a circular structure. The question “Which Dreamed It?” ends the narrative and thus her adventures: the last sentence invites the reader to join the guessing game “Which do you think it was?” (285).

In the sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, language and logic play even more important roles than they did in the previous narrative. Naming and definitions link some of the chapters; language determines the plot in that nursery rhyme characters become alive and act according to their texts. Several looking-glass reversals, such as eating biscuits to quench thirst and running to stay in the same place (Chapter 2), and handing around the cake before cutting it (Chapter 7), exemplify logical considerations. All in all, *Through the Looking-Glass* is the more ‘difficult’ book in that its structure is far more complicated than that of its predecessor. Although its basis is the structure of a game of chess, the world which Alice experiences is governed by chaos, violence, the absurd (cf. Thomas 120-21). By playing the game of chess, which alludes to the allegory of the game of life (Woollen), the attempt is made to order a world that is chaotic and opaque. Nonsense, however, eventually wins over, and Alice can but wake up.

Like its predecessor, *Through the Looking-Glass* was highly popular at its publication: 15.000 copies were sold in the first two months (Carpenter 527). The first *Alice* book, however, seems to have been more successful, and it often happens that only scenes from the second narrative are included in dramatisations and film versions of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

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