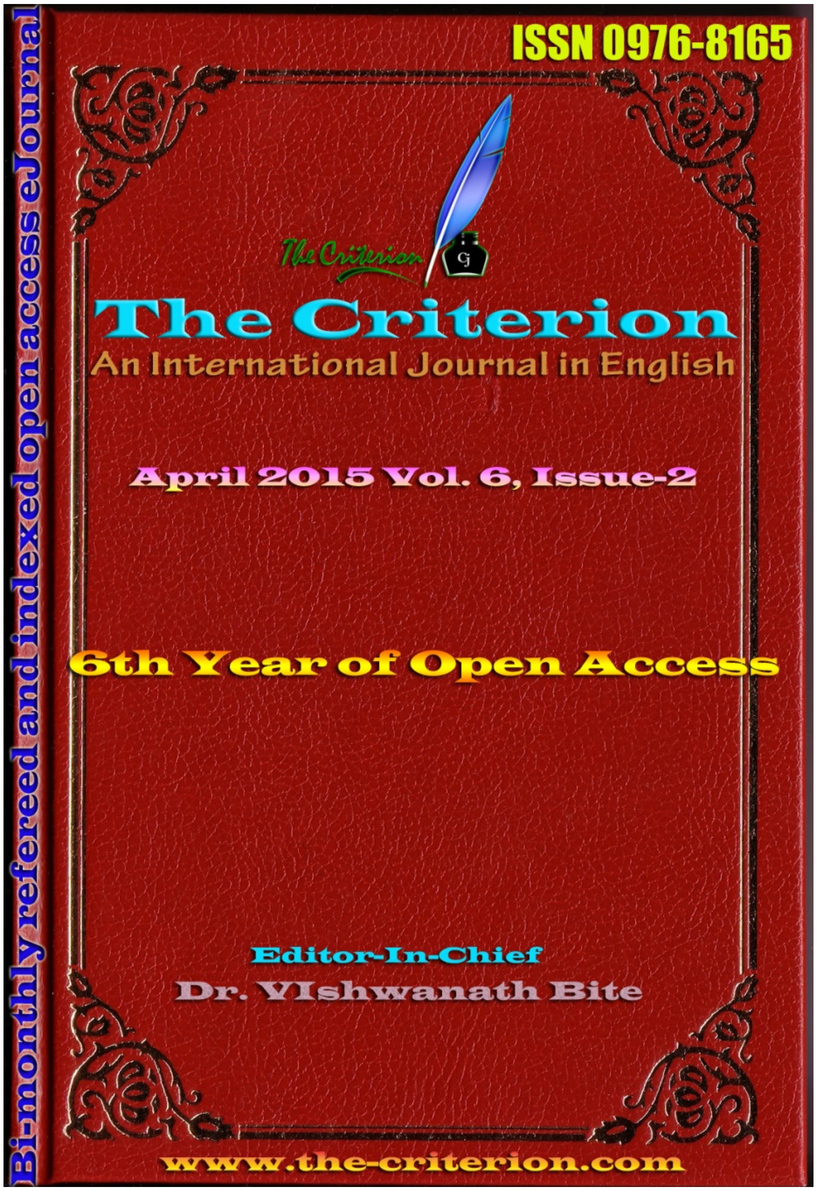

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Explorations into the Real: The Fantastic Deconstruction of Childhood in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*

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Abstract:
A child is a product of social conditioning and cultural practices. Language places these material cultural practices in a structure but falters to operate once it is placed outside that structure. Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* is a work of fiction which brilliantly focuses on the notion of how a child is made to identify the world around and what happens when one goes beyond the putative system of logic which is the de facto operative agency is one's understanding of the world. This paper is an attempt to deconstruct the operative agencies at work in the conditioning of a child as well as to deconstruct the meaning embedded in the system of logic that a child is educated to belief. Thus it is also an exploration of Carroll's critical treatment of the politics of the real world in a narrative of fantasy.

Keywords: Social conditioning of children, cultural practices, logic of the language-system

In *Through the Looking-Glass* Lewis Carroll offers a critical reading of social conditioning of a child through cultural practices. He looks at the operative agencies through which a child is made to identify the world around her. The Victorian idea of morality and its diverse manifestations is an underlying theme to discuss in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. The idea of schooling has also been looked at very critically. Carroll very perceptively brings out a picture of Victorian attitude towards childhood within a seemingly fantastic narrative. The text actually revolves around the fantastic and speaks of more about the material and the real. In this paper, I shall make an attempt to locate the brilliant ways and means through which Carroll explores the politics of the real world in his brilliant fantasy within the world of fiction.

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) is often seen by scholars as a less successful novel than its more celebrated prequel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Critics have interpreted *Through the Looking-Glass* as the more controlled and less spontaneous of the two works, more the product of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson[1], the mathematician, logician and Oxford lecturer than Lewis Carroll the story-teller. However, both the *Alice* books are historically fascinating because of their contrasting natures in comparison with the vast amounts of highly moralistic Victorian children's literature produced in England during that time. Like all other artifacts, Carroll's *Alice* books are products of their own era, bearing inscriptions of numerous transactions with the material and ideological contexts from which they first emerged. So it goes without saying that some of their most memorable effects depend on tangible connections to their specific historic milieu (Rackin, 101). This is in line with Martin Gardner's famous observation:

> In the case of *Alice*, we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of another century, and we need to know a great many things that are not part of the text, if we wish to capture its full wit and flavour. It is even worse than that, for some of Carroll's jokes could be understood only by residents of Oxford, and other jokes, still more private, could be understood only by the lovely daughters of Dean Liddell. (5)

Carroll's Alice has been considered both as a compliment to Victorian childhood and as a deliberate creation against that grain. According to Walter de la Mare,

> 'Alice herself, of course, with her familiar little toss of the head, with her serene mobile face, courteous, amiable, except when she *must* speak for herself, easily reconciled, inclined to tears, but tears how swiftly dashed away; with her dignity, her matter-of-factness, her conscientiousness, her courage (even in the most outlandish of circumstances) never to submit or yield; and with one of the most useful of social resources, the art of changing a conversation, what a tribute she is not only to her author but to Victorian childhood! Capable, modest, demure, sedate, they are words a little out of fashion nowadays; but Alice alone would redeem them all. And even if now and then she is a trifle superior, a trifle too demure, must not even the most delicate of simple and arduous little samplers have its wrong side?
>
> 'She might indeed have been a miniature model of all the Victorian virtues and still have fallen short of it if were not for her freedom from silliness and her saving good grace, a good sense that never bespangles itself by merely becoming clever. However tart and touchy, however queer and querulous and quarrelsome her "retinue" in Wonderland and in Looking-Glass Land may be—and she all but always gets the worst of every argument—it is this sagacity of mind and heart that keeps her talk from being merely "childish" and theirs from seeming grown-uppish, and, in one word, prevents the hazardous situation from falling into the non-nonsensical.' (59)

According to Nina Auerbach, 'Victorian concepts of the child tended to swing back and forth between extremes of original innocence and original sin; Rousseau and Calvin stood side by side in the nursery. Since actual children were the focus of such an extreme conflict of attitudes, they tended to be a source of pain and embarrassment to adults, and were, therefore told they should be "seen and not heard". Literature dealt more freely with children than life did, so adult conflicts about them were allowed to emerge more openly in books' (44)

To analyse if Carroll's Alice embodies this conflict in any way, it should be noted that she reflects not so much the ambiguity about children that adult Victorian society maintained but rather the consequence of that ambiguous reception upon a sensitive child's psyche. Carroll's essential empathy with his child protagonist in her battle against reality signified by her approaching adulthood as well as her struggle to hold on to her fantasy world in which she becomes a queen might play an influential role in the Alice's embodiment of such a conflict of attitude. Alice is further burdened by a troublesome identity crisis—when she asks 'Which dreamed it?'[2]—propounding a saddening notion that one might not be able to claim the fantasy to be one's own. The dominant metaphor of the chess game whose movements are determined by invisible players spreads Alice's sense of helplessness and predestination over the book. Alice is neither sure about all that happens to her in the Looking-Glass Land, nor does she knows whether it was her own fantasy or whether she was—literally and metaphorically—a pawn in someone else's. Brinda Bose observes that the fact that *someone else* is the enemy (the Red King) complicates matters but approximates the dream to reality. It is a hard lesson that every child must learn upon growing up: that one is not necessarily always directing—or playing the lead—in all of life's productions, but that one may be forced into unpalatable roles by others as they play out their lives (or fantasies) (Bose, xxiii-xxiv). Thus according to Roger Henkle, 'a deterministic impulse underlines the Looking-Glass dream; indeed, it ends with the suggestion that we are all part of the dream of a godlike Red King whose own unconscious wishes predetermined our lives' (qtd. in Bose, xxv).

Upon the reader's first encounter with Alice as a beautiful, innocent little girl who dreams of fantastical creatures and encounters on a lazy summer afternoon, the sense of *innocence* or rather precisely, the quintessential image of Victorian childhood in English Literature appears on the surface. Carroll's obsession with the innocent beauty of little girls transports Alice to a world of fantasy populated with strange creatures which, in its obvious unreality and its distance from the harshness associated with growing up (growing up is generally associated with the loss of the childhood *innocence*), offers her protection from the wide-awake anxieties of the time-and-money-centric contemporary Victorian bourgeoisie experiencing the rapid changes produced by industrialism, laissez-faire capitalism and technological developments.

Through the Looking-Glass draws critical thoughts on the idea of schooling as well. Education is one of the foremost manifestations of social conditioning of an individual. Known for its utilitarian ideals, the education system of the Victorian age limited the thoughts, speech, and actions of the individual; Alice's knowledge consists of mainly morals about obedience and safety, which mirrors the Victorian child's education of school spirit and improving character. The goal of Victorian lessons was to morph the student into a Christian lady or gentleman. The limitations of the utilitarian education system contributed to the identity crisis epidemic of the Victorian era in which children were especially affected. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Carroll uses the emphasis of facts in the Victorian education system, the likeliness of Victorian society to discourage the use of the imagination, and the importance of ideal male and female roles of the Victorian citizen, imposed on children at a young age, to create Alice's confused analogous to the identity crisis of children during the Victorian era. The rapidity of change occurring almost everywhere during the period, the dizzying pace of life in a multifarious, mechanized, time-and-money-centric mass society is reflected in Alice's fast-paced, crowded, discontinuous dream adventures. Alice in many ways is a bourgeois child of her own era and her identity crisis is attributed to Carroll's adherence to bourgeois ethos which was threatened by the mechanization, commodification, and acceleration that were transforming Victorian life.

The concept of the Victorian child marks a substantial shift from the eighteenth century notion of childhood. The *space* given to the child in the eighteenth century seems to have been denied by the Victorians. Jan B. Gordon notes that the role of the parents is minimized in the growth of the child because the child is not seen to have an identity prior to the age of seven, the argument being that before that age, in the words of Friedrich Froebel, "the mind has not triumphed over the needs of the body" (151). In 1937, twenty five years later after Froebel's observation, Sigmund Freud was first to suggest that such a triumph takes place only at an enormous cost and may not be one of the benevolent gifts of social evolution, but in fact may be a step backward– repression. Keeping this in mind, one might wonder whether Alice's attempt during her *adventures* to constitute a social family among the animals and strange creatures is not the burden of Victorian exile (Gordon, 151-152).

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, there are several passages that throw up the idea that words may not be entirely arbitrary signs, but, that the name of a thing may be somehow intrinsically connected with its nature, as the Daisy suggests in the following extract from Chapter II (The Garden of Live Flowers) when Alice finds herself in a garden full of talking flowers and asks if they are not frightened at being out there alone, and the Rose replies that there's the tree in the middle to protect them:

> "There's a tree in the middle," said the Rose. "What else is it good for?"
> "But what could it do, if any danger came?" Alice asked.
> "It could bark," said the Rose.
> "It says, '*Bough-wough!*'" cried a Daisy: "that's why its branches are called *boughs*!" [*Italics* mine]

A little later, when Alice comments that she has never before known flowers to talk, she is instructed to feel the ground. She finds out that the ground is very hard and is told that usually gardeners make the beds too soft, so that the flowers are always asleep.

These are simple puns which immediately establish a context. Patricia Meyer Spacks writes,

> In the actual world, no real relation exist between the bark of a dog and the bark of a tree, and flowers in hard ground are as speechless as flowers in soft. In the topsy-turvy world behind the Looking-Glass, on the other hand, there is far more regard for the import of words: their meaning cannot be evaded simply by making distinctions between "bow-wow" and "bough-wough". And the unavoidable suggestion is that our everyday use of language is largely arbitrary and unaccountable. (167)

In Chapter III (Looking-Glass Insects) of the book, in her conversation with the Gnat, Alice comments that names are arbitrarily conferred upon things by humans for their own convenience.[3]This is illustrated by the examples of the Rocking-horse-fly which is "made entirely of wood and gets about swinging itself from branch to branch"[4], and the Bread-and-butter-fly which consists of thin slices of bread and butter as its wings, a crust as its body, and a lump of sugar as its head, and lives on weak tea with cream in it. But in real world there is no connection or similarity between the common horsefly and a horse, as well as the butterfly and butter. Again in Chapter IX (Queen Alice), Alice is rebuked for attempting to slice a leg of mutton after she has been presented to it:

> "May I give you a slice?" she (Alice) said, taking up the knife and fork, and looking from one Queen to the other.
> "Certainly not," the Red Queen said, very decidedly: "it isn't etiquette to cut anyone you've been introduced to."

All this is extremely confusing for Alice, as confusing as dreams usually are. Alice's adventures are an educative process, but even after her encounter with Humpty Dumpty, she never becomes quite wary enough. She is unprepared for the vagaries of the White Knight, who reveals to her that what the name of a song is called, the name of the song itself, what the song is called, and what the song really is, can all be different. She is accustomed to a world in which language is used more loosely: it is never used loosely in Looking-Glass Land (Spacks, 169).

In *Through the Looking*-Glass, Carroll makes an attempt to deconstruct the meaning embedded in the system of logic that a child is educated to belief. Carroll's brilliance lies in the exploration of the arbitrary construction of language; language that seeks to mean and yet means nothing; language that operates within certain structural norms and falters very easily once it is placed outside that structure. The world of looking-glass appears in contrast with the real world that Alice confronts and she finds herself in a state of disbelief. The apt mathematician within, the real Carroll very subtly takes us through a journey in the Looking-Glass Land which very often also makes a statement about the world that tend to think to be logical and rational.

Notes:

[1] Lewis Carroll—a penname—was born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (January 27, 1832 – January 14, 1898).

[2] In Chapter XII entitled 'Which Dreamed It?' the final chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice raises the important question: "… let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question… it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!"

[3] In Chapter III entitled 'Looking-Glass Insects', when Alice and the Gnat talks about insects and Alice attempts to name some, the Gnat asks, "What's the use of their having names if they won't answer to them?" Alice replies, "No use to *them*, but it's useful to the people that name them, I suppose. If not, why do things have names at all?"

[4] In Chapter III, in the conversation between Alice and the Gnat, Alice attempts to name some of the insects she knows, and the Gnat shows Alice some of the insects in the Looking-Glass Land, starting with the Rocking-horse-fly.

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