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English 3308

Professor Zita Husing

### The Psychology Behind Alice

#### **Abstract**

This essay analyzes *Alice in Wonderland* through a psychoanalytic structure, arguing that Lewis Carroll uses the dreamscape of Wonderland to explore the unreliability, concern, and unconscious desires that mold Alice's transition from childhood to early adolescence. By creating Wonderland into an imaginative landscape controlled by the logic of dreams rather than reasonable order, the novel expresses Alice's internal conflicts and exposes the strain between her conscious aspirations and her unconscious impulses that avoid structure. The essay examines how Alice's shifting body size serves as a metaphor for her unsteady sense of self, simulating the physical and psychological changes a child goes through when they change from childhood to adolescence. Encounters with characters such as the Cheshire Cat, whose mysterious guidance makes Alice anxious, the Mad Hatter and March Hare, who give Alice riddles to tear down Alice's sense of logic, divulge how Wonderland challenges Alice to guide her emotions and thoughts that cannot be connected in her conscious life.

The analysis also reviews how Alice's descent down the rabbit hole is a symbol of Alice's withdrawal to daydream, a mental escape that allows Alice to exercise her fears and wishes that are otherwise repressed by societal expectations. Additionally, the essay discusses the Lobster Quadrille as a scene in which Alice evades her reality by engaging in a performance that displays the direct avoidance of her apprehension. Through close reading of key scenes and characters, this essay argues that Wonderland functions as an imaginative landscape that Alice uses to divulge the complexity of finding her identity. Ultimately, her arousal signifies how

emotional growth happens inside of the mind without rejecting the unconscious insights and the irrational aspects of one's sense of self.

## Introduction

*Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll is the story of a little girl who creates her own world called Wonderland to escape the reality that she actually lives in. The story has whimsical animals, impossible riddles, and a dream-like madness. Psychoanalytic theory is how a child's behavior is created through their experiences and how the unconscious mind reacts to these experiences. Alice's struggle with reality relates to psychoanalytic theory and the conscious and unconscious mind because the entire world of Wonderland is based on an imaginative world that Alice has created in her mind. The characters of the story display that Alice has a twisted psyche that allows her to imagine magical things that could relate to the people in her reality as she transitions from childhood to puberty.

To understand Wonderland as an unconscious landscape, it is important to contemplate how Carroll constructs the boundary between imagination and reality. As Pedraza states, "one might measure reality by existing on a physical plane where they have accepted the common rules and laws of mathematics and science" (Pedraza). From the beginning of the story, Wonderland is portrayed as a mental landscape Alice has created that she can physically use her five-senses in. It represents her will to escape the life she is grounded to and how she uses her imagination to create her freedom. Sara Bermejo Romera states that "the way in which Alice navigates Wonderland and how she faces the creatures is vital for her analysis" (Romera). The creatures that Alice has created for Wonderland, such as the Mad Hatter, White Rabbit, Queen of Hearts, and the Cheshire Cat, each show how she deals with her ideas, feelings, and dilemmas. The characters behave based on the logic of Alice's dream instead of logic to disclose that Wonderland functions using the subconscious of her mind instead of the rules of waking life. This transformation sets the tone for the story and suggests how Wonderland is portrayed as a

mental Alice’s playground where Alice can challenge emotional truths that her waking life does not allow her to directly have.



**Characters Alice Created in her Dreamworld: Wonderland**

### **Psychological Journey**

A crucial element of Alice’s psychological journey is when she falls down the rabbit hole. The rabbit hole represents Alice’s desire to daydream and escape the unyielding demands of her everyday reality. Before Alice can encounter the different characters of Wonderland, she starts to drift into an imaginative state while she is sitting by her sister, bored by the “dry” book with “no pictures or conversations” (Carroll 5). Her boredom is the emotive gateway she needs to slip into her psychological fantasy. From a psychoanalytic perspective, daydreams are a controlled entry into the unconscious, that functions as a safe space for Alice to live her desires and unprocessed emotions without reproach. The rabbit hole symbolically allows Alice to retreat away from adult expectations. Carroll describes Alice’s fall as slow and, in a dream-like, state with lots of time to look at her surroundings. The dangling descent reflects how Alice can stray from the basic limitations of time, authority, and logic. In this sense, the rabbit hole functions as the psychological threshold through which Alice escapes reality and enters a symbolic landscape

that lets her freely explore her individuality. It is only when Alice fully surrenders to the imaginative fall of the rabbit hole that she is able to confront her fears, uncertainties, and desires that do not allow her to develop her sense of self.

Alice's constant change in size throughout the story shows how unstable her sense of identity is. When she becomes too large or too small, we can see her inner turmoil of trying to figure out who she is and how she fits in with society. These alterations of state show how children experience growing up in a psychologically different way than adults. Children feel out of control because they do not know who they are and what they want their "image" to be. Gabriele's analysis suggests that "Wonderland in general could contribute to her sense of confusion, we know that is specifically her changing size that befuddles her sense of identity" (Gabriele 10). Gabriele's analysis of Alice attempting to regulate her size shows how Alice wants to control her emotions and behavior, though the task is hard, and her imagination is unpredictable to control. An example of Alice's growth is when she grows uncontrollably inside of the White Rabbit's house. She panics and sobs because she is "always growing larger and smaller" in Wonderland (Carroll 34). The overwhelming size she grows to reflects the burden of adapting to new expectations as she grows during puberty. Conversely, the size she shrinks to confronts her feelings of being powerless and insignificant. Children can often feel these emotions when they do not fully understand something. Joka Oto states that "Her physical changes symbolize the psychological and emotional fluctuations that teenagers experience as they transition from childhood to adulthood" (Oto).

Throughout the story, Alice's body functions as a metaphor for her unstable identity while the nonsensical riddles and conversations that happen in Wonderland further spotlight between Alice's conscious desire for order and an unconscious desire for chaos. Characters like the Mad Hatter and the March Hare challenge Alice's strive to reason through circumstances, by showing her rules do not apply in Wonderland's dream-like environment. Their riddles, jokes,

and indirect disagreements represent the thoughts and feelings that cannot be understood just through real-world logic. For example, during the tea party, the Mad Hatter asks the impossible to answer riddle of “why is a raven like a writing desk?” reflecting how the unconscious mind communicates through symbols, conflict, and compulsion through structured language and reasoning (Carroll 70). The irrational nature of this riddle reflects on Alice’s internal struggle of whether she should attempt to understand her environment, when her subconscious pushes her into situations that are hard to put logic with.

Moreover, Alice’s increased frustration at the tea table reveals how deeply she depends on logic to feel secure in her identity. When her attempts at reasoning are scorned and expelled, she becomes progressively undetermined, illustrating how the unconscious part of the mind impairs her efforts to maintain dominance. Psychoanalytically, Wonderland forces Alice to confront the part of herself that rejects order and the part of her mind that produces childhood emotions, impulses, and anxiety. The chaotic conversations switch topics without warning while piling contradictions on top of contradictions, showing that the concurrent structure of dreams flows without restriction of thoughts. By placing Alice in a situation where communication is unreliable, Carroll shows her intelligent, conscious self must grapple with a deeper psychological realm that is filled with uncertainty, fear, and hesitancy. This confrontation pushes Alice to have emotional growth as she begins to understand her inner world logic. Her inner world logic requires allowance for uncertainty and the acceptance of her identity that like Wonderland’s riddles, do not always have a clear answer.

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4ckLBt0Q0ng1R6w978v6CU?si=99880bb3ead949a2>

**Song from Spotify that uses some of the nonsensical words the Mad Hatter and March Hare use during the tea party scene.**

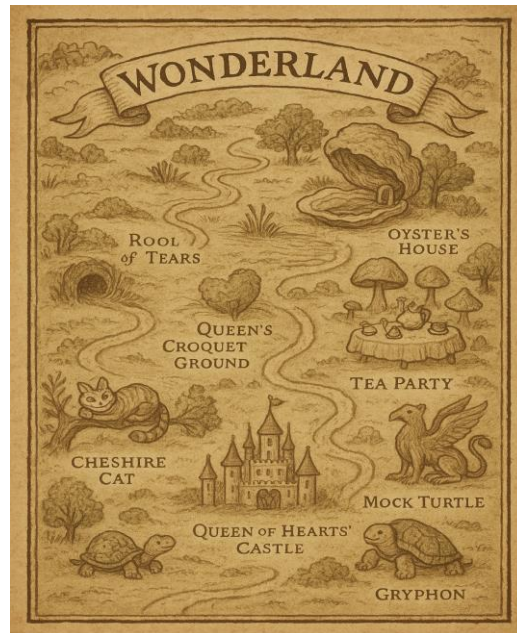
One of the most psychologically significant figures in this story is the Cheshire Cat. Unlike many of the other characters of Wonderland that are hostile and disorderly, the Cheshire Cat serves as a peculiar and unnerving escort through Alice's unconscious mind. His ability to disappear and reappear at will reflects the erratic thoughts that drift through the mind without reprieve. He speaks in riddles and contradictions, causing Alice to question her presumptions and challenge her understanding of how logic works. When he tells Alice that "we're all mad here," he introduces the idea that madness in Wonderland is not a flaw but a natural state of mind (Carroll 65). This moment reveals a deeper theme of how the unconscious mind does not follow regular rules, and how chaos is another form of simple truth. The Cheshire Cat's calm affirmation of nonsense helps Alice to realize that her journey requires self-reflection with flexibility, making him a symbol of instinct and inner recognition. His response to Alice's situation of not knowing where to go next proves that Alice needs to reflect on who she is to discover her personal identity.

Another moment that reveals how Alice uses wonderland to detach herself from reality is the Lobster Quadrille scene. On the surface, the scene looks absurd: the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon enthusiastically encourage Alice to participate in a foolish dance involving lobsters, sea creatures, and whimsical rules. However, beneath its notion lies a symbolic representation of Alice's attempt to avoid the challenges and uncertainties she faces in her real life. The Mock Turtle describe the dance with a mixture of sadness and remembrance, saying, "Once... we went in the Quadrille," a tone that mixes joy with anxiety (Carroll, ch.10). Psychoanalytically, this scene reflects how children often use songs and games to indirectly process their feelings when they are confusing. Alice listens, engages, and asks questions, but never understands the intent and logic behind it. The scene represents a reflection of her struggle to comprehend adult beliefs

and the world's social rules. The choreography of stepping forward, withdrawing, and throwing the lobsters away can represent the symbolic motion of advancement and evasion. Alice was trying to experiment with the engagement of her fears and desires, while trying to retreat whenever they became too overbearing. By watching and joining in small sections of the dance, Alice uses the moments as a psychological shield to let her avoid the clash of her painful and most complex emotions directly. Thus, the Lobster Quadrille serves as another manner of Wonderland being her psychological playground. Wonderland is an imaginative space that allows Alice to move around, avoid, and momentarily escape the anxiety and hard truth her conscious mind is not yet ready to face.

One of the most crucial characters is the Queen of Hearts, with her eruptive temper and constant command for executions, represents an amplified version of the figures in Alice's real life. In dreams, emotions can escalate and misshape ordinary experiences, and the Queen fulfills the symbol of being confusing and frightening to a child who is confronted with an adults' power. Auerbach argues that "The Queen's croquet game magnifies Alice's own desire to cheat at croquet and to punish herself violently for doing so" (Auerbach 8). During the croquet game, the unstable rules of flamingos serving as mallets and hedgehogs running away, reflects Alice's experiences with adult expectations being inconsistent. She tries to follow the rules of the game, but finds the arrangement for it impossible and wrong. The croquet scene mirrors the struggle Alice has for conformity and independence in a world where she is not allowed to have both. Alice's interaction with the Queen of Hearts displays her internal fight between freedom and compliance. When Alice later stands up to the Queen during her chaotic trial, she rejects both external and internal sources of obstructive authority by transitioning from being fearful to being

confident of who she is. She demonstrates that she is ready to be comfortable with the changes in her mind and body as she transitions from adolescents to adulthood.



**Map of Wonderland**

Alice awakening from her dreams of Wonderland suggest that Wonderland served its psychological purpose. Throughout *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice moves between curiosity, anger, admiration, and horror reflecting the shifting emotional terrain of the unconscious mind. Wonderland forces Alice to confront her uncertainties and to question the trustability of the rules she has been taught in her real life. Michael Dylan Welch states “it is a delightful observation, alongside the coincidences in *Alice in Wonderland*, to see coincidences in reality, but even more delightful to see coincidences between the two” (Welch). Her journey shows how imagination can be educated and confusing, offering her an escape from her reality while also disclosing truths about herself that are difficult to consciously express.

In the end, Alice's dreamlike escapade spotlights the complex relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind. Warren Weaver states that "It is small wonder that it was necessary to invent a dream-world for escape (Weaver 15). Carroll's novel advocates that imagination is a powerful tool to help with exploring identity, challenging emotions, and being able to test the boundaries of reality. *Alice in Wonderland* is more than a story with whimsical characters and impossible riddles, it is an exploration on the psychological aspects of a young girl's life, and how often the chaotic nature of childhood is thought about.

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