

# A Fantasy Subverting the Woman's Image as "The Angel in the House"

Aihong Ren

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, Shandong, China

**Abstract**—In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll creates a subversive fantasy of females seeking autonomy and independence by means of the fantastic mode. The female characters in the underground include the Duchess, the Cook, the Queen of Red Hearts and Alice. They all display clear features which are atypical of the popular ideal woman image of the Victorian society---"the angel in the house", like obedience, self-sacrifice, passiveness and gentleness. On the contrary, those adult females show madness and violence in their separate roles, while Alice the little girl displays autonomy, independence and aggression in her fantasy quest. By subverting the ideal woman image, Carroll gives expression to the repressed feelings of the woman in his society.

**Index Terms**—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the angel in the house, Alice, gender role

## I. INTRODUCTION

"The Angel in the House" is the popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman. The phrase comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women. Though the poem did not receive much attention when first published in 1854, it became increasingly popular through the rest of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential in the twentieth century. The word "angel" becomes a synonym for woman. The popularity of this poem and the phrase play a very great role in shaping perceptions of woman's nature as the opposite of man's nature and essentially passive. She was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband. The angel was passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all---pure. What is more important, she should possess a majestic childishness, and has a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home. Woman is idealized as man's subordinate or victim, entirely dependent on man. Though this ideal primarily expressed the values of the middle classes, Queen Victoria's devotion to her husband Prince Albert and to a domestic life encouraged the ideal to spread throughout nineteenth century society.

John Ruskin shared the same idea about woman in his essay "of Queen's Gardens". He agrees that the innate feminine nature is separate and distinct from the masculine.

The woman's power is for rule, not for battle---and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. (Ruskin, 1920, P.120)

Ruskin reiterates the idea that a woman's place is at home. As an angel, she should be kept untainted by the public life, the world of affairs which belong to man. The woman's duty is to create a world of peace where the man can take refuge from the harsh outside world and the children can be well taken care of. Her main role is to "provide a place of renewal for men, after their rigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere" (Gorham, 1982, p.4).

Among the four main stereotypes of women in Victorian society: "the angel, the demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman" (Auerbach, 1982, P.63), no doubt the angel is the most dominant image. In realistic literature of the Victorian period, a portrait of submissive and domesticated angel was widely promoted and accepted, yet Lewis Carroll creates the subversive fantasy of females seeking autonomy and independence by means of the fantastic mode. Fantasy proves a very useful tool to subvert the dominant social values and conventions. The writers of fantasy enjoy much more freedom of breaking the social conventions than the writers of realistic fiction, for they are not concerned about social sanctions as fantasy does not hold the story or characterization accountable to reality. Under their pen, powerful father-figures become weak and incompetent; while the angel-like mothers are bestowed with great power, yet they display no ideal, angel-like features in their behavior. The traditional gender roles are reversed, and the sexual difference is blurred or dissolved. Even the little girl, a miniature angel in the house is portrayed differently in a fantasy. As Knoepfmacher points out, fantasy allows writers to "portray little girls who were allowed to express hostility without the curbs on female rebelliousness that had been placed earlier in children's literature" (Knoepfmacher, 1983, P. 14).

## II. DISCUSSION

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the female characters are outnumbered by the male. There are only four female

in the underground world--- the Duchess, the cook, the Queen of Hearts and Alice herself. They all show some madness in their separate roles. The Duchess is a mother figure who abuses her baby; the Cook is a representative of the working-class women, who is very bad-tempered, silent but angry, violent. The Queen of Hearts takes on a dual role as a mother and wife in private life and a ruler in public life, who is furious to execute everybody and whose tyranny is greatly feared.

#### A. *The Adult Females*

The Duchess is a mother figure, yet she is rather brutal in treating her child, which is a complete reversal of the ideal mother figure as “a perfect lady, an angel in the house, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the House”(Showalter, 1977, p.14). When Alice enters the Duchess’s house, she finds her sitting in the middle of the kitchen with a baby in her arms. With the pepper in the air, the noises from the cook and the baby’s howling, the Duchess becomes very tense and loses her temper. Noticing the Cheshire-Cat, Alice approaches the Duchess and asks her why it is that the cat grins. The irritated Duchess responds that if Alice doesn’t know that all Cheshire-Cats have grins, then she doesn’t know much. The Duchess also bursts out a very scornful and insulting word to Alice: “Pig!” (Carroll, 1993, p.62) Alice warns the cook to be careful with her cooking appliances lest the baby get hurt, but the Duchess tells her to mind her own business and says violently: “Chop off her head!” The verbal threat intends to silence the innocent child Alice and ask no questions with the adults when they are busy. The Duchess also sings a lullaby to the baby in an effort to quiet it and make it stop crying: “Speak roughly to your little boy, /and beat him when he sneezes: /He only does it to annoy, /Because he knows it teases...” (Carroll, 1993, p.64) Meanwhile, she gives the baby a violent shake, and finally tosses the baby violently up and down to frighten it into silence and submission. To the Duchess, if the baby dares to challenge the parents’ authority by teasing and howling, he surely deserves to be beaten. It is quite apparent that the Duchess is far from being content with her role as a mother; she rather resents her role as a mother, eager to abandon her role and her baby. So when she fails to quiet the baby, she throws it away to Alice. The baby is a burden to her, and she cannot wait to escape from it to enjoy herself. As a matter of fact, the hysterical Duchess turns to be very pleasant when she is free from the household duty and babysitting. When Alice encounters her again in the croquet ground, she is very happy: “You can’t think how glad I am to see you again, you dear old thing!” (Carroll, 1993, p.89) Strangely enough, the Duchess never asks Alice anything about what has become of her baby. It seems that she has completely forgotten and deserted her role as a mother. Yet it is the same Duchess who claims to Alice that “’tis love, ’tis love, that makes the world go round.”(Carroll, 1993, p.90) When we consider she is a mother devoid of love, this is a more biting irony. The Duchess reminds readers of many tense mothers who are completely different when they are away from their children. Though she is portrayed as ugly, mad, grotesque and abusive, she is not “intended as a condemnation of women as mothers. Rather, in some part, she is Carroll’s kindred spirit” (Honing, 1998, p.31). Carroll expresses his sympathy for her reaction to the burden of motherhood.

The Cook serves as a servant for the Duchess. She is a representative of the working-class women. Most of the working-class women had to work in the factories or the upper-class family to make some money to provide for their poor family. As a rule, they were poorly treated: overworked and underpaid, yet they did not dare to complain for fear of losing their job. The Cook in Carroll’s fantasy does not talk much; however, she manages to find some expression of her repression. She puts too much pepper deliberately in her soup, annoying her mistress, and causing her to sneeze. Apparently the Cook is not happy with the Duchess who has come to the kitchen to disturb her work. She is getting more and more furious while working, so she begins “throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby---the fine-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes” (Carroll, 1993, p.63). A real cook shall never do anything like this to her mistress, but in a fantastic world, her actions go unpunished. Later on in the trial scene, the Cook appears as a witness to testify, carrying the pepper-box with her. The pepper-box becomes her mark and symbol, signifying her hot-temper, as a way to tell the others to leave her alone. When asked by the King to give her evidence, she merely says one word: “Shan’t” (Carroll, 1993, p.113). Her indifferent and provocative attitude annoys the King and shocks the whole jury. The Cook’s refusal to obey her mistress and answer the King clearly shows her courage to defy the authority, and it is an attempt on the part of the lower class to disrupt the oppression/repression binary state in the social structure.

The Queen of Hearts is the most powerful female figure in Wonderland. She is equally mad just like the Duchess. She treats her people in the same way that the Duchess treats her baby. When Alice finally manages to enter the beautiful garden she has been longing to enter, she finds it full of disorder, madness and rage. After Alice enters the garden, she finds the gardeners busily painting the white roses red just because the Queen wants it that way. When Alice refuses to satisfy the Queen’s demands to know who the cards are, the Queen flies into a rage and threatens to chop off her head. The Queen demands absolute authority, and if someone dares to challenge her, she would be furious and issue a verbal threat of execution. Her mere presence is greatly feared by her subjects. She violently orders the soldiers to execute the three gardeners who paint roses; in the Croquet-ground, she never stops quarrelling with the players and deals with their conflicts merely by shouting “off with his head”. Under her tyranny, the King becomes infantile and weak. His masculinity and dominance are gone, and he is terrified by his wife. When the King is angry with the Cheshire Cat, he does not know what to do with it and calls the Queen for help. He knows the Queen would frighten away the impolite thing. Sure enough, the Queen just throws her order to chop off his head, which brings about terrible consequence. As the Cheshire Cat has no body but a smile, her order is impossible to be executed, which shows her

absolute power is challenged again. The Queen just bursts out in great madness, saying that if something wasn't done about it in less than no time, she'd have everybody executed. As a wife and ruler, the Queen of Hearts sways "between a sovereign's public power and a woman's private influence" (Geer, 2003, p. 9). Later in the trial scene, the Queen becomes an observer while the King presides at the trial and interrogates the suspect and the witnesses. Still, the Queen intervenes constantly by shrieking out her threatening order, which results in great chaos in the court. When the King asks the jury to consider the verdict, the Queen demands "Sentence first, verdict afterwards" (Carroll, 1993, p.121) And when Alice criticizes the Queen's judgment and refuses to obey her order, the Queen shouts at her loudly and angrily "Off with her head!" in an attempt to make her surrender. The Queen does not bring about peace or order in her garden. Quite on the contrary, she embodies threat, power and madness.

#### B. *Alice the Little Girl*

In the family novels of the nineteenth century, the little girls are widely portrayed and idealized as obedient, caring, diligent, eager to please and devoted to the family. They are the little angels in the house. As Gardener remarks, "There was a tendency in Victorian England, reflected in the literature of the time, to idealize the beauty and virginal purity of little girls." (Gardner, 2000, p. xix) Deborah Gorham also asserts that while "both male and female children were of importance in idealization of family life..., daughters had a special significance...[as they] could offer the family a particular sort of tenderness and spirituality." (Gorham, 1982, p.5) Gorham goes on to say that

Much more successfully than her mother, a young girl could represent the quintessential angel in the house. Unlike an adult woman, a girl could be perceived as a wholly unambiguous model of feminine dependence, child-like simplicity and sexual purity. (Gorham, 1982, p.7)

However, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll depicts a little girl who enjoys great physical power. Alice is definitely not a girl of "modesty and obedience" (Honing, 1998, p.84), features which make her an ideal Victorian girl. In this tale, Alice follows a talking White Rabbit, down a well, through a pool of tears, and into a garden where she encounters a Mad Hatter's tea party, a game of croquet played with living things, and a trial of the Knave of Hearts. Alice is a child entering a world of adults ranging from the neurotic White Rabbit, to the officious Duchess and crazy Queen of Hearts. These mad, absurd creatures attempt to order Alice about, but Alice manages to answer them back. Throughout the adventure, sometimes she is frustrated, helpless, and puzzled about her identity, yet she manages to control her body and finally return back to the reality in triumph. She insists on independence and refuses to be dominated by the creatures, thus showing herself as a little girl of great wit, courage, assertion and strong-will. She is adventurous, even aggressive as a male hero, the very opposite of the ideal girl.

As a girl of seven years old, Alice is physically strong and powerful. She is not afraid to fall down the rabbit hole. When she sees the rabbit, driven by bursting curiosity, she follows him and falls into the Wonderland. In spite of the long fall, she remains unscathed: "Well!" thought Alice to herself. 'After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home!' (Carroll, 1993, P.18) Here Alice displays her unusual bravery. Alice's power is mostly displayed in her control of her body size.

Alice goes through a series of bodily changes in Wonderland. Interesting enough, almost all the changes are linked with drinking and eating. Food is very closely connected with the everyday life of the children, and children's strong interest in food also makes them pay special attention to it. After all, food is crucial in the process of children's growing up, and children may find it hard to resist. When Alice comes to the Rabbit's house, she happens to see a bottle near the looking-glass, and intuitively thinks that something curious is sure to happen if she drinks it. The drink enlarges her to a preposterous degree and as a result, she is trapped in the small house, unable to move. Then the falling pebbles that turn into cakes attract her attention and she immediately eats them which reduces her again and makes her smaller than a puppy. Her frequent changes of body size puzzles her, leading to her great anxiety about who she really and whether she is still the same person she was when she woke up in the morning. Alice expresses her doubts about her identity: "...I wonder if I've changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great trouble!" (Carroll, 1993, P.26) She wonders whether she has been changed for Mabel, which would be unfortunate since Mabel is not very smart in her lessons and Alice would have to live in her "poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with" (Carroll, 1993, P.27). She decides that, if indeed she is Mabel, she will refuse to come back up the rabbit hole.

Her frustrating feeling of loss is best shown in her encounter with the Caterpillar. When the sleepily smoking Caterpillar sitting on a mushroom asks Alice with an impertinent tone: "Who are you", Alice feels more puzzled than ever. She attempts to explain: "I--I hardly know, Sir, just at present--at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I have changed several times since then" (Carroll, 1993, P.49). Unsatisfied, the Caterpillar utters a curt order to ask Alice to explain herself, which is beyond Alice: "I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir...because I'm not myself, you see." And of course, the Caterpillar can not see that precisely because he has no previous version of Alice to compare the present one to. Considering the fact that constant metamorphosis is the very nature of the caterpillar, the unlucky Alice stumbles upon the one creature in the world who simply cannot offer empathy for her countless changes in size and shape, since bodily transformation is a norm for the caterpillars. The Caterpillar objects to her saying that changing many shapes in one day is confusing. Alice tries to drive home her point to the caterpillar: certainly once he's changed into a chrysalis and butterfly, then he will feel a "little bit queer." However, he insists that it

won't. Exasperated, Alice states: "Well, perhaps your feelings may be different, ...all I know is, it would feel very queer to me". The Caterpillar manages to belittle even this qualified claim: "You! Who are you?" (Carroll, 1993, p.49) This leads Alice to nowhere since it is the very question that puzzles her. Alice endures more ridicule from the creature before it asks her what size she wants to be to which Alice responds that she isn't particular as to size; the only problem is, "one doesn't like changing so often, you know" to which the Caterpillar curtly replies, "I don't know." (Carroll, 1993, p.54)

It is quite clear that the body becomes a tool for Alice to make sense of the crazy world. Alice is quite obsessed with the size of her body and she constantly shows dissatisfaction for not having the right size. Alice's bodily transformations can be interpreted as a realization of the child's dream to get rid of the control from the adults. We all know children like to imagine themselves different than they really are. Sometimes they dream of becoming tiny enough so that they can evade the control from the authoritative figures, either parents or teachers; sometimes they yearn to become so huge that the adults can do nothing about them for their enormous size and power. In the beginning of her arbitrary body changes after drinking or eating things, Alice is much confused about her identity. However, she gradually comes to realize being big is better than being small. When she is in White Rabbit's house, Alice is tired of being so little and therefore ordered about by the rabbit as a maid. She looks around in hope of finding something to make her grow. After she drinks a potion, she gets very huge indeed and the little house can hardly hold her. She has to lie down to make herself comfortable. In spite of the inconvenience, she enjoys the delight of being tall and big, for it gives her power to fight. As a matter of fact, she nearly destroys the White Rabbit's house. When the Rabbit comes near the window, Alice stretches her hand out of the window to prevent it from entering the house, which causes great panic among the animals. When the Rabbit sends his servant Bill to go down the chimney, Alice kicks him up the chimney like a sky-rocket and hurts him. When the Rabbit suggests burning down the house, Alice poses a verbal threat: "If you do, I'll set Dinah at you." (Carroll, 1993, p.45) When they attack her with little pebbles, Alice shouts at them loudly to make them stop. Here Alice becomes the powerful one and completely relies on her own to resolve conflicts with the adults. Due to the large size of her body, she has overcome her former fears about them, adopts the adult language and behavior to fight with them. Her physical growth "is apparently symbolic of her personality growth, her growth in confidence, assertiveness, and courage" (Honing, 1998, p.84). When Alice learns to control her body at will, she gets more aggressive and powerful. The empowered Alice can boldly challenge the adult values, even when the adult comes from the royal family ---the Queen herself.

Alice is a polite, cultured little girl of Victorian society. Still, she shows her independence and vast difference from the image of a "girl angel". She is clever, self-reliant and she refuses to be anyone's fool. She may be frustrated and confused in her quest adventure, but she recovers very soon, showing an extraordinary resilience. She dares to confront those who try to dominate her, showing an unusual assertiveness. Under difficult circumstances, she emerges as a victor, leader and protector for those weaker creatures. In the pool of tears, Alice leads the group of animals to swim to the shore; in the Caucus-race, she acts as the prize-giver to the competitors; in the Rabbit's house, she defends herself against the attacks of the rabbit and its friends, kicking lizard Bill up the chimney; when the pigeon accuses of her as a serpent, she insists that she is a little girl; in her encounter with the Caterpillar, she takes her leave after finding the creature unpleasant; in the Duchess's kitchen, she tries to stop the Duchess from abusing the baby and then nurses it after it is abandoned; in the mad-tea party, she sits at the tea table in spite of the party's claim "No room, No room" (Carroll, 1993, p.70) and protests angrily when they make rude remarks; in the Queen's garden, Alice refuses to answer the Queen's demands and protects the gardeners from being beheaded; in the queen's croquet ground, even the domineering Queen herself seeks help from Alice for her advice about beheading the Cheshire Cat who has no body but a head; in the climactic trial scene, Alice takes away the pencil from a jurymen for the squeaking noise annoys her and upsets the whole jury by tipping over the jury-box. With the growth of her body, Alice is getting more confident and takes a more masterful control of her situations. She interrupts the King, defies the Queen, and rises to the protection of the accused Knave. She declares angrily to the Queen that they are nothing but a pack of cards, and when the cards come flying at her, Alice "gave a little scream, half of fright, 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, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees on to her face" (Carroll, 1993, p.121). In her dream, Alice is fighting back the cards by beating them off her. Her display of boldness and aggression mark her different from those meek, gentle and obedient heroines typical of the Victorian ideal female.

### III. CONCLUSION

In Lewis Carroll's fantasy, the power relations between genders are reversed and subverted. Sadly, this is only a dream. Alice's rebellion and aggressiveness can only exist in a dream journey. When she comes back to the reality with her normal size, she becomes the docile Victorian little angel girl again, obeying her sister's order to run in to her tea that is denied in the Mad Tea-Party. Nina Auerbach discusses the idea of "size" in this story by relating it to the notion of Victorian girls being restrained from growing up: "Cast in the role of emotional and spiritual catalysts, it is not surprising that girls function as protagonists of Victorian Literature are rarely allowed to develop." (Auerbach, 1973) Kincaid also agrees that Alice is restrained from growing up, and just like the Victorian typical girl, she is forever imprisoned in her childhood (Kincaid, 1992, p.278). Carroll does give many hints at this social fact for the little girls in

the fantasy. Although Alice enjoys great bodily power, her achievements are subverted repeatedly in the text and she also can never leave behind her femininity. For instance, in the last chapter entitled “Alice’s Evidence”, Alice and the Wonderland creatures all gather in the courtroom to determine who has stolen the tarts. Alice now feels her body growing suddenly, and her alarming physical presence becomes a threat, as the Dormouse says she has no right to grow there. When she is summoned to give evidence, Alice “jumps up in such a hurry that she tripped over the jury-box with the edge of her skirt, upsetting all the jurymen on to the heads of the crowd below and there they lay sprawling about” (Carroll, 1993, p.115). However, in spite of the fact that Alice has great physical power, her potency is quickly reduced when she attempts to reorganize them: “Oh, I beg your pardon!” she exclaimed in a tone of great dismay, and began picking them up again as quietly as she could” (Carroll, 1993, p.115 ). The large Alice now takes the role of a caretaker or preserver of order, which is a traditional image assigned to the woman. In another word, she is not completely free from the restraints of gender role.

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**Aihong Ren** was born in Weifang, China in 1976. She received her Master’s degree in English and American Literature from Shandong Normal University, China in 2001.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China. Her research interests include English literature and Children’s literature.