

Power Struggle between the Adult and Child in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

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Abstract—Lewis Carroll portrays the struggle of power between the adult and child in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and displays a strong sympathy for the child Alice who is thrown into a mad and disorderly world of adults. Those adult figures are all anxious to dominate Alice and infantilize her. But the powerless child shares and asserts her power in the adult world. By describing Alice's struggle against the adult figures for power, Lewis Carroll exposes and challenges the power relationships of adult and child, and subverts the social conventions and binary opposition between the adult and the child.

Index Terms—*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, power struggle, adult, child

I. INTRODUCTION

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* remains as one of the greatest classic work not only for children but also for adults ever since its publication in 1865. The tale was originally told for the amusement of three Liddell girls, daughters of the Dean of Oxford College, where Carroll was teaching as a mathematics tutor. He wrote it down in memory of their fun on a boat trip, naming it *Alice's Adventures Underground* and presented it to Alice Liddell as a birthday gift. Later, he altered the title to the present one when he was preparing it for publication. Darton called the publication of this fantasy "the spiritual volcano of children's books." (Darton, 1932, p. 267) Unlike the heavily moralistic and didactic children's books of the time, the Alice book is famous for its playfulness. It is purely of entertainment, with no instruction or morality whatsoever. As noted by *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, it is "the first literary fairy tale for children with no moral purpose whatever. Alice moves in a dreamworld, remote from ordinary laws and principles" (Zipes, 2000, p.88) Carroll's Wonderland story "cleared away the dead wood in children's literature and marked the arrival of liberty of thought in children's books" (Carpenter, 1985, p. 68) Readers young and old have been especially fascinated by the little heroine Alice endowed with her numerous qualities. She inherits the typical femaleness of a Victorian woman such as politeness and good manners, yet she also displays features of a male hero like assertiveness and independence.

Ever since its publication, critics and researchers have attempted to analyze this baffling yet fascinating work from many different perspectives. Humphrey Carpenter rightly asserts that "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Trough the Looking-Glass* are so well known that trying to re-examine them with a fresh eye is rather like attempting to make a new estimate of the Bible or Shakespeare." (Carpenter, 1985, p.57) Deeply influenced by the Romantic images of childhood, Lewis Carroll adores the innocent children especially little girls and holds them as ideal company. He finds himself often at his happiest in the company of children, talking to them happily and freely without any barrier or embarrassment he feels in an adult society as a poor stammerer. Carroll as an adult surely suffers in the adult society, but his inner and real self is finally free with children, for he becomes a child himself. There is always a power imbalance between the adults and children, as children are considered by the adult society as insufficient and in need of guidance to grow up and become socially acceptable. Different from many Victorian writers who exploited children's books as a means of dominating children, Lewis Carroll exposes and challenges the power relationships of adult/child. He portrays the struggle of power between the adult and child in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and displays a strong sympathy for the child Alice who is thrown into a mad and disorderly world of adults. By sending the child into an adult world, Lewis Carroll subverts the social conventions and binary opposition between the adult and the child.

II. DISCUSSION

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the heroine Alice follows a talking White Rabbit down a well, and enters a garden where she attends the Mad Hatter's tea party, a game of the Queen's croquet, and a trial of the Knave of Hearts. Almost all the figures that the child Alice encounters in Wonderland are adults, such as the White Rabbit, the Caterpillar, the Duchess, the Mad Hatter, the King and the Queen of Hearts. Very often, Alice comes face to face with those adults and she has to struggle with them for power. At a close look, those adult figures, no matter human or animal or card, are all anxious and try their best to dominate Alice and infantilize her. As a matter of fact, power is the primary source of their anxiety. Power and adulthood are closely related. We are more powerful than others because we are more mature or adult-like; the opposite is also true: we are more grown than others because we have more power. Tim Morris uses the term "juvenilize" to refer to the imposition of power over another person by placing one's self in the role of adult to

the person, who turns out to become implicitly a child (Morris, 2000). This happens again and again in Alice's encounters with them.

Children have been relegated to the position of the inferior, the weaker, and the other in western culture. Children should obey the wishes of adults and succumb to their authority. In the third chapter, after getting out of the Pool of Tears, Alice and the other animals discuss ways of getting them dry, but she can not reach any agreement with the Lory and they begin to argue. The Lory finally interrupts her with impatience: "I am older than you, and must know better". (Carroll, 1993, P.32) The Lory takes it for granted that Alice is just an immature child who is therefore quite unable to make any sensible suggestions. Finally, Alice and the other animals accept the proposal from the oldest animal among them the Dodo and have a running race. When the race is over, Dodo declares that everybody wins and he assigns Alice to give out the prizes. In despair, Alice pulls out a box of comfits out of her pocket and hands them around. Given that each person wins, at the request of the Mouse, Alice is forced to surrender her little thimble to the Dodo, who gives it back to her in a solemn prize-giving ceremony. Alice as a winner deserves to take the prize offered by the adults. However, she is forced to surrender her own personal belongings to the whole party, which is definitely unfair for the child. Moreover, sweets are closely connected with happiness, while the thimble is linked to the role of sewing and womanly duty. Alice is rather reluctant to be treated that way, but a child's concerns are never of too much weight to the adults. With no power of her own, Alice has to submit herself to the arrangement of the adults. The relationship between adults and children is never equal in real life, more so in the underground. The powerless child has to endure all the injustice in an adult-dominant world.

In the real world, the adults try to infantilize the child in order to remain in power. They will not allow a child to challenge their position or threaten their power. In Chapter five "Advice from a Caterpillar", Lewis Carroll mocks the adults' desire for power by portraying an arrogant caterpillar. When the creature meets Alice, he addresses Alice in a languid voice, demanding her to answer the question: "Who are you?" As Alice has undergone several physical transformations earlier that day and becomes very confused about her own identity, she cannot offer any explanation. Alice takes it for granted though that the Caterpillar is an infant, as he is the larva of a butterfly. If a butterfly marks the state of being an adult, then the Caterpillar must be a baby. Therefore, Alice believes that the Caterpillar can understand her feelings of confusion over her bodily changes: "When you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will someday, you know--and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you'll feel it a little queer, won't you?" (Carroll, 1993, P.50) However, the Caterpillar denies her bluntly, saying "Not a bit", and then continues to demand Alice to answer the mysterious and baffling question "Who are you". Only a child will be puzzled by the bodily change, as an adult who has experienced this process of growth will take it lightly. By demonstrating his difference, the Caterpillar takes hold of his dominant position. Alice would not like to be defeated so easily; she works up her courage to ask him back the same question. The unpleasant Caterpillar ignores this question and changes the subject of the conversation, advising Alice to keep her temper. Considering the fact that the Caterpillar is very bad-tempered himself, this advice demonstrates the hypocrisy of the adults. The Caterpillar's intention to control Alice is further shown in his demanding Alice to recite nursery rhymes. Alice obeys this order and when she finishes, she is criticized for being "wrong from beginning to the end". (Carroll, 1993, P.54)

The process of growing up involves a pursuit of knowledge. Alice is a very curious girl, but her desire for knowledge is never encouraged by the adult figures in Wonderland. Quite on the contrary, she is scorned for her questions and reduced to silence. In Chapter 6 "Pig and Pepper", Alice enters the Duchess' house, where she sees a large cat grinning from ear to ear. She asks the Duchess timidly why the cat grins like that. The Duchess answers that it's a Cheshire cat, adding a final word "Pig". "She said that word with such sudden violence that Alice quite jumped". (Carroll, 1993, P.62) "Pig" is a synonym of "fool" and "idiot", a most scornful and insulting term used to address to a child, which causes much alarm in Alice. Alice is attacked as being a fool for asking questions. When the discouraged Alice admits that she does not know cats can grin, the Duchess replies that "You don't know much, and that's a fact." (Carroll, 1993, P.63) In the eyes of the adults, the child is ignorant. The innocence of the child lies with his/her ignorance. The child should remain that way and never venture to ask stupid questions, especially when that question challenges the position of the adult as the powerful. In Chapter 7 "A Mad Tea-Party", Alice encounters three adult figures engaged in a tea-party: the March Hare, the Hatter and the Dormouse. Alice wants to join them, but when they see her coming, they cry out: "No room! No room!" in spite of the fact that the table is a large one. Alice is indignant by their behavior, and sits down in a large armchair at one end of the table. When Alice sees these creatures wasting their time asking riddles with no answers, she asks them questions, which is evaded by the March Hare: "Suppose we change this subject." (Carroll, 1993, P.75) The Dormouse then tells a story of three little girls living at the bottom of a treacle-well, which quite amazes Alice and prompts her to ask more questions. As a matter of fact, Alice begins to question the validity of the story, for she believes there is no such thing and utters her doubts:

'There's no such thing!' Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went 'Sh! sh!' and the Dormouse sulkily remarked, 'If you can't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself.' (Carroll, 1993, P.76)

They attempt to silence her to obedience, yet the curious Alice would not be silenced. She continues to ask more questions, expressing her own ideas and thoughts, and continued to be interrupted and scorned by the adult figures. The Hatter even calls her "stupid" in the same way that she is called a pig by the Duchess. They ask her questions, but interrupt her again before she answers:

‘Really, now you ask me,’ said Alice, very much confused, ‘I don’t think—’

‘Then you shouldn’t talk,’ said the Hatter. (Carroll, 1993, P.77)

Alice can not bear this piece of rudeness and she gets up in great disgust and walks off. They take no notice of her leaving, not caring about her at all. The adults seem to be happy to get rid of a child with many questions.

The same thing happens again in Chapter 9 “the Mock Turtle’s Story”. The Mock Turtle who tells his story stands on the ledge of a rock, while Alice sits in front of him, and their relative position mirrors the relationship between a teacher and a student in the classroom. For Alice’s question, the Turtle scolds her angrily: “Really you are very dull”; at the same time, the Gryphon says that “You ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking such a simple question.” (Carroll, 1993, p.95) They stare at Alice in angry silence, thus degrading Alice to a subordinate position, and then ordering her to recite moralistic poems. Despite unwillingness, Alice is forced to the authority of the adults and dare not challenge their authority. What the adults are doing is trying to repress Alice the child and assure their own mastery. In order to attain this goal, they sometimes resort to threats of violence, so that the child might be frightened to submission. The Duchess and the Queen of Red Hearts are very good examples.

The Duchess is in brutal mania and treats her child in an abusive way. When Alice enters the Duchess’s house, she finds the Duchess sitting on a stool in the middle of the kitchen, carrying a crying a baby in her arms. There is the pepper in the air; the cook is doing things roughly and the baby is howling very loudly, all of which makes the Duchess very annoyed and tense. The cook is throwing about her cooking appliances, so Alice warns her to be careful for fear that the baby be hurt, but the Duchess asks her to mind her own business and threatens to chop off her head. Her verbal threat has an apparent purpose: to silence Alice. The child should never ask the adults too many questions when they are busy or bad-tempered, or he or she will be threatened with punishment. The Duchess then sings a lullaby to the baby to be quiet: “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) In the same time, she shakes the baby violently, and then tosses it up and down so as to frighten it to stop crying. To the Duchess, if the baby annoys the authoritative adult with howling, the adult surely has the right to punish it. The children must submit to the power and wills of the adults, for they have no power to compete with the bigger and stronger adults. If they dare to defy the authority of adults, they will receive violent and terrible threats of death. The Queen of Hearts is a most threatening adult figure in Wonderland. When Alice refuses to answer the Queen’s question regarding the identity of the cards, the Queen instantly becomes furious and again threatens to chop her head off. She also constantly orders the execution of her subjects and commands with “off with his head!” Later in the trial scene, when Alice criticizes the Queen’s judgment “Sentence first, verdict afterwards” (Carroll, 1993, p.121) and refuses to obey her order, the Queen shouts at her loudly, demanding her to hold her tongue and threatens angrily “Off with her head!” in an attempt to make her surrender.

Judging from the child, those adult figures are quite absurd, cruel, irrational and emotional. They are inclined to lose their temper and behave badly, yet they are quick to punish those deemed inferior. The disempowered child has no choice but to surrender to their wills if he or she intends to stay in the power contest. Alice as a Victorian little girl of middle-class is very polite and good-mannered when she encounters the strange creatures in the Wonderland. However, she learns from her environment and quickly adapts herself to it. She does have the boldness and courage to utter her own thoughts and to rebel against those absurdities. Lewis Carroll employs a fantasy structure, a legitimate way of being playful to give her more power to resist the adult authority. Alice’s power comes from her unusual ability to change her appearance into different sizes. When Alice is sitting at the bank with her sister, she has the body of a little girl of seven-year-old. However, when she enters the Wonderland, her body is no more restrained by the physical growth in real life and she has the chance to experience physical changes again and again within a short time.

In Wonderland, Alice undergoes bodily changes for several times. It is worth noting that almost all her changes in bodily size are related to eating and drinking. Food is closely associated with the children’s daily life, and children tend to display an intense interest in food. To the child, food very often is crucial and irresistible. In Chapter 1, Alice first drinks from the bottle with the words “Drink Me” and shuts up like a telescope; she then eats up the small cake in a little glass box marking “Eat Me” and turns to be as tall as nine feet high. In Chapter 4 the Rabbit’s fan makes her small again. When Alice enters the Rabbit’s house, she spots a bottle near the looking-glass, and intuitively draws the conclusion that if she drinks it, something interesting might happen. Indeed, it turns out that the drink makes her much larger than her usual self. Alice becomes so big that she gets trapped in the Rabbit’s small house and can not move. Then her attention is caught by the falling pebbles and she immediately eats them, which changes her size and makes her smaller than a puppy. Alice is very confused by her frequent changes of body size, causing her to wonder 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 another poor girl named Mabel, and if that is the case, it would be very unfortunate since Mabel is not very clever in her lessons and lives in a “poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with” (Carroll, 1993, P.27). That kind of life is rather unpleasant, so Alice makes up her mind that she would refuse to leave the rabbit hole.

Alice’s intends to make sense of the crazy adult world with her body as a tool. It is not difficult to find that Alice is often unhappy with her body for not being the right size. Alice’s change of her body size can be understood as a wish-fulfillment of the child to be free from the control of the adults. Children very often imagine themselves acquiring

the ability to change at will. Sometimes they desire to become so tiny that they can be free from the adults; sometimes they long to get so large that the adults can do nothing with them. In the beginning of her change of body size, Alice is very puzzled about her identity. However, she gradually comes to realize that being big has more advantage than being small, for big size is associated with greater power. When Alice is in the White Rabbit's house, she gets sick of being so little and treated with no respect. She looks around the house, hoping to find something to make her large. After she drinks a potion, she gets so huge as to be entrapped in the Rabbit's little house. In spite of the awkward inconvenience, she enjoys her large bodily size, for it gives her enough power to fight back. Alice stretches her hand out to prevent the Rabbit from entering the house and kicks Bill the lizard up the chimney like a sky-rocket and injures him. When Alice hears the Rabbit talking about burning down the house, she utters a threat: "If you do, I'll set Dinah at you." (Carroll, 1993, p.45) When they attack her with pebbles, Alice shouts loudly to force them to stop. Alice is no more afraid of the creatures. In this situation, Alice becomes the powerful because she has larger body than the other creatures. Therefore, she is no longer afraid of the adult figures, as she can rely on her own power to protect herself and fight against the adults. Her physical growth "is apparently symbolic of her personality growth, her growth in confidence, assertiveness, and courage" (Honig, 1998, p.84). Later on, Alice gets more and more powerful and aggressive as she can change her body at will with the help of the mushroom.

After Alice eats the pebbles-turned cakes, she becomes small again. Coming out of the Rabbit's house, she runs into an enormous puppy which makes her terribly frightened, for she is very likely to be eaten with her small size. The puppy is a pet for human beings in real life—Alice still calls it "Poor little thing" (Carroll, 1993, p.45) despite its big size, but one very important rule in Wonderland seems to be "size matters", or big size is tantamount to more power. Alice had so much power to defeat all the animals just a moment ago, but now she is powerless again with the big size gone. It is doubtless to say that being bigger means more power, so when asked later by the Caterpillar what size she wants to be, she is very certain about one thing, that is, she "should like to be a little larger", because "three inches is such a wretched height to be." (Carroll, 1993, p.55) She would not be wretched as a small one, but rather someone with big size and great power. Having tasted the sweetness of being powerful, Alice is very delighted to find that her neck would bend about easily in any direction like a serpent and curve down in a graceful zigzag after she eats one side of the mushroom and becomes huge again. As A.S. Neil asserts, "No one really wants to remain a child. The desire for power urges children on." (Neil, 1960, 52) Even Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up and remains eternally young, does not resist growth itself. He just cherishes too much the value of childhood and hates the hypocritical and unnatural state of adulthood.

When Alice gets the ability to change her bodily size at will with the magical mushroom, she can do things more freely: she enters the Duchess' house without permission; she barges into the mad tea party, ignoring their loud protests of "No room"; she refuses to obey the Queen's orders in the garden, and snatches away the pen of a juryman at the trial. The empowered Alice can boldly challenge the adult values, even when the adults are royal members, ---the Duchess, the Queen and the King.

When Alice finally comes into the Queen's garden, she finds that the gardeners are busy painting the white roses red because it is the Queen's wish. In the presence of the Queen, Alice acts respectfully but thinks to herself that she needn't be afraid of them for "they're only a pack of cards". To the Queen's demands to know who the cards lying on their faces are, Alice bravely retorts: "How should I know? ... It's no business of *mine*." Alice goes on to interrupt the Queen's order that the girl's head be chopped off: "Nonsense!" She pronounces the word so "very loudly and decidedly" that the Queen is silenced immediately (Carroll, 1993, p.82). Alice wins her first battle with the adult who happens to be a very powerful figure, which takes on a deeper meaning. Alice even assumes the role of a powerful protector for the gardeners. When the Queen orders to chop off their heads, they run to Alice for protection. During the Queen's croquet tournament, in a conversation with the Duchess, Alice keeps a polite demeanor while harboring thoughts of how unpleasant and ugly she is. When the Duchess chides, "Thinking again?" Alice answers severely, "I've a right to think" (Carroll, 1993, p. 91). It is indeed of great significance for Alice to boldly assert her right to think. The child not only is aware that she has a right to think, but also a right to speak out what she thinks. In the trial of the Knave of Hearts, many witnesses are summoned, interrogated and threatened by the King and the Queen to give evidence or face execution. At this moment, Alice feels that her body is growing larger. When the Dormouse argues with her: "You have no right to grow *here*" (Carroll, 1993, p. 99), Alice boldly retorts to his criticism by saying that is nonsense since he is growing too. When Alice is called to the witness stand and asked to give her evidence, she honestly replies she knows "Nothing whatever." (Carroll, 1993, p.116) The truth is that Alice does not even know the accused Knave of Hearts and whether he has stolen tarts is not to her knowledge or concern. The King deliberately invents a rule in an attempt to banish her out of the courtroom, but clever Alice sees through his trick and questions the validity of his rule. When the Rabbit shows the court an unsigned letter as the most important evidence, the eager King is ready to charge the accused with theft, but Alice declares that there is no meaning in the rhyme at all. She also challenges the whole court's ability to interpret it. When the King asks the jury to consider their verdict, the Queen flies into rage and demands "Sentence first---verdict afterwards". Alice considers it as absolute nonsense, since a sentence can only come after the verdict.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly. "The idea of having the sentence first!"

"Hold your tongue!" said the queen, turning purple.

"I won't!" said Alice.

“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). “You are nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll, 1993, p. 121)

As the whole pack of cards fly at Alice, she gives “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, 1993, p. 121) Threatened with execution, Alice boldly shows the injustice of the trial, the invalidity of the law, and absurdity of the adult world. By defying the order of the adults, Alice has deconstructed their authority and asserted her own right as an independent, courageous and self-confident child. Alice faces the circumstances so calmly and bravely that she even fights back with anger by beating the cards off. She throws away her fear and emerges as triumphant and victorious to return happily to her afternoon tea and carefree days in reality.

III. CONCLUSION

The underground Wonderland is just like a competition whose rules are made and altered at will by the powerful adults. Alice brings the unfair play to an end with her rebellion. Confronted with those underground creatures in Wonderland, such as the White Rabbit, the Duchess, the Caterpillar, and the Queen, etc., Alice always suffers a feeling of helplessness, frustration, and even despair. When the adults put on an air of insufferably arrogant and domineering air, giving her a variety of disciplines and proverbs, Alice tries to get rid of their control and to maintain independence. By shifting the bodily size and using an oral aggression, Alice escapes from her disadvantaged position and shows to the adults that her power as a child should not be belittled. Children, like adults, have their unique needs and they also long for power. The powerless child shares and asserts her power in the adult world. The adults in Wonderland are very childlike, being unreasonable, passionate and absurd; while Alice is more mature and rational in front of them. Those adult figures in Wonderland order, ignore or belittle Alice in the way they treat children in real life. But Alice does not conform to the behaviors of real children in her dream journey. She scorns their absurdity, defies their orders, and deconstructs their authority. The adult/child relationship is not a fixed one, but rather relative and arbitrary. In this fantasy, Lewis Carroll uses the little child’s journey for power and self-reliance to subvert the fixed hierarchal structure of adults and children. Instead of exploiting children’s books as a means to transmit ideology to children and repress them, Lewis Carroll recognizes the child’s value and defends the child’s rights for power. The adults should not impose their values on the child, but respect the child as an individual having inner value. No wonder this fantasy has remained a popular classic for the children and adults, “the first children’s book that could be read with equal pleasure by both children and adults” (Senick, 1989, p.38) and “a book of that extremely rare kind which will belong to all the generations to come until the language becomes obsolete.” (Carpenter, 1985, p.68)

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