Power in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books

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Abstract

Nonsense is a genre many have experimented with but few have mastered in fine detail. In a time where change was imminent, Lewis Carroll skilfully employed the mechanisms of nonsense in his children's books *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. This essay takes a closer look at how Carroll approaches the topic of authority and power within the social context of nineteenth century England. The first part of the analysis focuses on how power is initially distributed in the relationship between Alice and the imaginary creatures. It examines the girl's physical and mental development that allows her to gain control over the unknown she is faced with. In the second part, the paper shifts its emphasis to language, investigating the power that meaning or no meaning (associated with nonsensical language) can have over the reader. Power is revealed as an object of the imagination that can redesign itself according to each person's intellectual context and background.

Keywords: Authority, power, 19th century England, Alice in Wonderland.

Essay

At a social level, the 'survival of the fittest' implied by Charles Darwin and later defined by Herbert Spencer has developed into social Darwinism, with people defining the notions of rank and power according to the conceptual background they are familiar with. In order to have power, they need to feel in a position of control so they can survive the trials they are submitted to. But, at the same time, they feel resentment for the unknown that presents a barrier for evolution. This limited view of the world thus creates a problem the majority might refuse to see but Carroll explores it further and tries to depict the image of British society by following the reactions of Alice, a product of

Victorian society, in face of the unknown and the irrational realm of the fictional creatures. This analysis of power in the two stories will therefore question how power is established in a world that is apparently without order and has no recognizable rules to be guided by and if Alice has the ability to understand and surpass the limits she is accustomed to.

An important factor in the dynamics of the story that can be seen all throughout both books is the creatures' hostility towards the girl. She is seen as an intruder and treated as such. The episode of the battle between the Lion and the Unicorn presents an example of how the inhabitants of the fictional world see Alice:

> "What-is-this?" he said at last. "This is a child!" Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her . . . "We only found it today. It's as large as life, and twice as natural!"/ I always thought they were fabulous monsters!" said the Unicorn. "Is it alive?"/ "It can talk," said Haigha solemnly./ The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said "Talk, child" (Carroll, 2001, p. 241).

The unfamiliarity therefore affects both parties and renders them powerless. However, the Unicorn, being in charge in his own environment urges Alice to talk, thus re-establishing his authority. In a similar scene, Alice takes advice from the Caterpillar, eats a part of the magic mushroom and starts growing. The pigeon that sees her thinks she is a serpent, as much as Alice tries to reason with it. But the rules of reasoning do not apply here in the same manner as in the real world so she is further seen as a threat to the realm: "(…) little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know"./ "I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're kind of serpent; that's all I can say"." (Carroll, 2001, p. 57). There is a neutral territory where representations of authority and power are eliminated and that is the Wood of No Names. Here, Alice is not menacing anymore and as proof, the fawn walks alongside her all the way through the forest. However, as soon as they leave the margins of the woods and the fawn remembers Alice is a "human child", the animal runs away. This is an example of how human dominance crosses the boundaries of fiction and establishes itself as a given in the fictional universe. Nonetheless, this also shows how language interferes in the relationship between the two worlds, seeing that labelling Alice as a 'human' and himself as a 'fawn', his immediate instinct is to flee as far away as possible from the girl.

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Alice is confused by the meaning of power and authority partly because her education presented her with a rigorous set of laws that are no longer available in the imaginary realm. Society has taught her manners, etiquette and the rules of conversation, but has also dictated that adults are in charge and she has to obey them. When she finds herself in a new and strange situation, her only solution seems to consist of defining the unknown by what is recognizable to her, meaning the rules of Victorian society. Therefore, the relationship between the girl and the creatures might not only be influenced by the defensive attitude of the latter, but can also be induced by Alice's own vision of authority that automatically appoints the fictional characters in positions of power. When the White Rabbit orders her to give him a new pair of gloves, for example, Alice follows his order, without being convinced of its logic: "And Alice was so much frightened that she ran off at once in the direction it pointed to, without trying to explain the mistake that it had made" (Carroll, 2001, p. 58). The fact that she is seen as a child and, as a result, inferior to them, is clearly stated in Lory's simple statement: "I'm older than you, and must know better" (Carroll, 2001, p. 30). This is said even though there is no evidence to support the declaration.

The type of interaction between Alice and the creatures is remarked by the girl herself: "Everybody says 'come on!' here," thought Alice (…) "I never was so ordered before, in all my life, never!" (Carroll, 2001, p. 99). Her indignation towards authority is thus a feeling which slowly emerges towards the surface. Paradoxically, nothing and no one is considered as important or in control, although the fictional realm's ruling is similar to reality, with Queens and Kings on the highest level of authority and laws and regulations to help govern the rest of the subjects. The Gryphon confirms that, although the Queen frequently condemns the creatures to death, this is just a "fancy" of hers and nobody is actually beheaded.

The lack of strict rules and confirmed figures of power to which Alice is accustomed, and the fact that she is a child in the process of growing up, leads the girl towards a crisis of identity. The changes she is going through are very puzzling, not only to the creatures, but also to her. When the Caterpillar demands to know who she is, Alice is not entirely sure what to answer: " 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 must have been changed several times since then" (Carroll, 2001, p. 49). She is however certain she has changed and this change involves a development in how power is distributed between the two worlds.

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While the story progresses, the attitude of the creatures does not vary, but Alice's view of them does, showing her development towards adulthood. Slowly, she begins to regain control over her own actions and questions the plausibility of the other characters' words, but not without going through a period of transition.

Before she re-establishes her authority, she struggles between the two identities: that of a child and an adult:

> "She generally gave herself very good advice (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people" (Carroll, 2001, p. 18).

But this is natural for a growing child whose personality is not yet defined. She slowly starts to fight back against the absurd oppression of the imaginary characters. An example can be found in her conversation with the Duchess who forbids her to think: "I've a right to think," said Alice sharply, for she was beginning to feel a little worried. "Just about as much right," said the Duchess, "as pigs have to fly" (Carroll, 2001, p. 97). Here, the Duchess undermines the power of rational thought by creating a nonsensical simile, but Alice does not accept it as easily as before.

However, a turning point in her transition is the court trial where the girl directly confronts the King and Queen about the way in which the trial is presided over:

> "'Rule Forty-two. All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.' Everybody looked at Alice. 'I'm not a mile high,' said Alice. 'You are,' said the King. 'Nearly two miles high,' added the Queen. 'Well, I shan't go, at any rate,' said Alice, 'besides, that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now'. 'It's the oldest rule in the book,' said the King. 'Then it ought to be Number One,' said Alice" (Carroll, 2001, p. 125).

Although she is neither allowed to grow up nor to get out of being under the Crown's authority, Alice manages to overturn the King's sovereignty and decides for herself what has to be done. Her development, as it can be seen, is not only on the level of the psyche, but also physical, thus emphasising her evolution towards adulthood.

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Starting with *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice's character seems stronger and she reassumes power over her journey through the fictional world. Although it is not the same realm as Wonderland, she is already prepared to face the abnormalities and peculiarities that an imaginary world could confront her with. Although she is just a pawn at the beginning of her journey, she is determined to become a Queen, but even before she goes through the looking-glass, her defiance of authority and drive to overthrow the known commanding entity is depicted through a cruel and violent phrase she once addressed to her nurse: "Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyæna, and you're a bone!" (Carroll, 2001, p. 247).

Alice's evolution does not go unnoticed among the creatures that, until then, had power over her. Beginning with the caterpillar's remarks when Alice expressed her desire to grow up in the first book, followed by a similar one made by Humpty Dumpty later on, the girl is subjected to resentful treatment. This resistance is seen as a response to the fear of having Alice in a more important role in the imaginary world:

> "'Seven years and six months!' Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. 'An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked my advice, I'd have said "Leave off at seven"—but it's too late now'. 'I never ask advice about growing,' Alice said indignantly" (Carroll, 2001, pp. 221-2).

Humpty Dumpty uses wordplay to convince Alice to give up her power. Her reply is proof that Alice is adamant about defending her own identity, independent of the fictional universe.

Another change in attitude noticed in Alice is related to her reaction to the Tweedle brothers' poem, "The Walrus and the Carpenter". In this case, she does not side with the victims anymore, the oysters, and tries to decide who of the two protagonists was a better and fairer character. James R. Kincaid argues further on this matter that Alice tries to identify with the power figures of the poem (1973, p. 95). What it could mean is that Alice wants to leave her powerless self behind and reverse the balance of power between her and the fictional characters. Her cruel attitude towards the victims is emphasised at the end of the story where the girl is planning to repeat the poem to her kitten, comparing the oysters to her pet's breakfast.

There are certain paradoxes to deal with in this new dynamic of power between Alice and the creatures. Firstly, there is the issue of how Alice is treated once she becomes a queen. Although her title should mean that she has absolute power, her limits are clearer than ever. She is not allowed

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to enter her own palace and is confused with a commoner. When she does enter the place, she is under the strict supervision of the two Queens, who continue to give her orders: "'Make a remark,' said the Red Queen: 'it's ridiculous to leave all the conversation to the pudding!'" (Carroll, 2001, p. 276). But this authority matter is solved in the end while the fictional dream falls apart and Alice takes control of the Red Queen, which is now the size of a doll: "I'll shake you into a kitten, that I will!" (Carroll, 2001, p. 280). A certain cycle is being completed by this event. Whereas earlier, the girl grew physically as a sign of her growing power, now the Red Queen reduces its size, diminishing its authority at the same time.

The twin brothers mention another issue related to power, saying Alice is only a product of the King's imagination. This could nullify all of Alice's efforts to gain her independence from the magical world. Carroll makes sure that this remains a question until the end of his book, possibly to let the readers think of how power, as any other concept defined by man, is rooted in the human imagination.

W. H. Auden wrote that "in both worlds, one of the most important and powerful characters is not a person but the English language. Alice, who had hitherto supposed that words were passive objects, discovers that they have a life and will of their own" (1971, pp. 9-10). This thesis explains why language becomes a source of power in itself within the two stories, a power applied to both character and reader. As far as Alice is concerned, she does not have the capacity, as the reader, to stop and try to understand what she is faced with and then continue with her journey. She has to move on whatever the obstacles. Her weakness comes from not understanding the nonsensical language used by the creatures. This is her main impediment while dealing with the fictional worlds. For example, when Alice talks to the Duchess about the Earth turning around its axis, the woman suddenly changes the subject by linking the homophone 'axis' to 'axes' and screaming "chop off her head!" (Carroll, 2001, p. 63).

There are a lot of examples of wordplay in the two texts that work with the relationship between the signifier, the real representation of the word and the signified, the abstract notion attributed to the object of representation. There is an example in the Red Queen's speech about the 'hill': "When you say 'hill' (…) I could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley" (Carroll, 2001, p. 171). Therefore, language has an arbitrary function and can be associated with a different meaning depending on what the speaker wants to say. This theory is emphasised by Humpty

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Dumpty's words who claims that "when *I* use a word (…) it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more, nor less" (Carroll, 2001, p. 224). The explanations given by the characters themselves define how nonsense works in their world, a process that Alice will learn to understand throughout the two stories.

As she grows up, the little girl begins to recognize nonsense in the creatures' speech and this gives her power over them because by knowing what nonsense is or looks like, she can participate in conversations with the fictional characters. As some define nonsense literature, it is not the absence of sense but "a clever subversion of it that heightens rather than destroys meaning" (Anderson and Apseloff, 1989, pp. 4-5). Hence, by defining the nonsensical language, Alice manages to break into the imaginary worlds and understand their different mechanisms, thus evolving from her previous limited knowledge without destroying it.

There are several instances in which Alice recognizes the use of nonsense. For example, in her conversation with the twins about the King's dream, she says: "'I know they're talking nonsense,' Alice thought to herself: 'and it's foolish to cry about it.'" (Carroll, 2001, p. 198). She even talks about nonsense during the trial, when the Queen of Hearts wants: "sentence first – verdict afterwards" (Carroll, 2001, p. 129). To regain control over the situation, Alice asks Humpty Dumpty to initiate her in this art of nonsense by letting him explain the meaning of the words in "Jabberwocky". After this, it is much easier for her to establish her authority, seeing that she is thus able to rationalise, by a new means of rationalising, the events that are happening in the imaginary universes.

For the reader, the author prepares a background and a setting that are not available in Alice's case. The flexibility of his language is not meant to encrypt his text, but to allow a multitude of interpretations, all of which could form a description of Victorian society. The author gives the reader numerous clues as to how nonsense is used by the characters. For example, when the conversation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty continues and Humpty decides to change the subject, Alice thinks: "He talks about it just as if it was a game" (Carroll, 2001, p. 221). The readers have access to the characters' inner thoughts which allows them to further explore the meaning of language.

Another way Carroll's linguistic experiment interacts with the reader's reality consists of all the parodies of real texts of the nineteenth century. This creative craft gives the reader the power to

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understand the context in which the *Alice* books were written so that the references from the text are clearer to them.

The examples given above have shown that power, authority, and the balance between reality and imagination are closely connected with Alice's journey towards adulthood. As a product of the Victorian society, she enters the fictional worlds with a certain limitation, which renders her inferior to the creatures to begin with. Once she is accustomed to the mechanics of this apparently chaotic world, she begins to regain her strength and achieve power in front of the creatures, the best way of doing so proves to be mastering the language of nonsense itself. Therefore, language is the key to power and Alice manages to use it in order to transcend her limits and familiarise herself with the unknown.

By playing with language, Lewis Carroll emphasises that power is an object of the imagination, meaning that the definition of the term varies according to the theoretical paradigms possessed by each human being. When Alice grows up, her knowledge develops and she learns how to redefine power in the context of the imaginary world that is now familiar to her. She thus gains control over what happens to her. However, this linguistic experiment not only benefits the little girl in the stories, but is also a step in the evolution of literature as it is perceived in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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