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Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and the Fragility of the Ego: A Lacanian Reading

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Abstract

This article examines Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1865) through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on the development and disintegration of the ego. Although Carroll's text is often read as a whimsical children's tale, it contains profound symbolic structures that dramatize the instability of selfhood when confronted with the unconscious. By engaging with Lacan's concepts of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, the analysis demonstrates how Alice's descent into Wonderland destabilizes her identity, exposing the fragile foundations of her ego. Her failed attempts to impose logic, morality, and language—learned within the Symbolic order—highlight the arbitrary nature of meaning and the relativity of order. Furthermore, Alice's uncontrollable bodily transformations and dialogues with herself illustrate Lacan's notion of the fragmented body and the alienated ego. Ultimately, Wonderland functions as a satirical mirror of the Symbolic order, revealing the precariousness of identity and the subject's inevitable subjection to the Other.

Keywords: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Jacques Lacan; psychoanalysis; ego; Symbolic order; unconscious; fragmented body; identity.

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1. Introduction

Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1865) is one of the most celebrated works of the "Golden Age" of children's literature. At first glance, it appears to be a whimsical tale intended to entertain young readers: a little girl follows a white rabbit down a hole, enters a fantastical underground world, experiences a series of curious adventures, and ultimately returns to the surface only to realize that it has been just a dream. Yet beneath its playful narrative lies a text rich with symbolic and theoretical implications, which has inspired countless critical interpretations. This article analyzes Carroll's work through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. By situating Alice's journey in relation to Lacan's concepts of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, the study argues that Alice's Adventures in Wonderland dramatizes the fragility of the ego and the instability of identity when confronted with the unconscious.

2. Alice Between Two Worlds and Lacanian Stages

The narrative begins with an ordinary scene: Alice sits idly beside her sister, who is reading a book "without pictures or conversations" [1:25]. Suddenly, Alice notices "a White Rabbit with pink eyes" [1:26] running and anxiously muttering, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!" [1:26]. Without hesitation, she follows him down the rabbit hole and enters an entirely different realm. Carroll thus establishes a duality between two worlds: thelogical, conscious world above ground and the irrational, unconscious world beneath it.From a Lacanian perspective, Alice's identity has already been shaped within the Symbolic order. According to Lacan, the ego develops through three stages: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Real corresponds to the earliest phase of infancy, when no distinction is made between self and external reality. The Imaginary, also known as the mirror stage, occurs when the child sees "his own image in the mirror" [2:1] and recognizes its reflection as a "whole," creating an illusory sense of mastery. As Lacan puts it "we have to understand the mirror stage as an identification" [2:2]. However, just as he states, this identification is "*meconnaissances* [misrecognition]" [2:6] because what the child sees in the mirror is just an image and it is not its true self and "this form situates the agency of the ego … in a fictional direction" [2:2]. The ego, therefore, is founded on illusion and alienation. The Symbolic stage marks entry into language and social order. As Lacan explains, "the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words" [3:45]. Here the child becomes a speaking subject, internalizing the laws of language and society. Alice, as a literate schoolgirl, embodies this Symbolic order. She believes in logic, stability, and inherent meaning. Yet her ego "constituted [by an image] in an exteriority" [2:2] and cohered through Symbolic laws begins to unravel as she descends into the unconscious.

3. Descent into the Unconscious and the Crisis of Knowledge

Once Alice leaves the conscious realm above ground, she enters the subterranean world of the unconscious. Lacan notes that "the unconscious itself has in the end no other structure than the structure of language" (Lacan, [3:38]. Yet although structured like language, the unconscious resists stable meaning; it is governed by signifiers without fixed signifieds. To Alice, trained to expect order and coherence, this world appears chaotic. Nevertheless, her desire to impose meaning compels her to interpret Wonderland through the frameworks she acquired above ground.Her attempts repeatedly fail. While falling, she applies geography and mathematics: "I

wonder how many miles I've fallen … I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" [1:27]. These terms, once authoritative, prove meaningless here. Her multiplication tables collapse into nonsense: "Four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen …" [1:38]. Even poetry, once familiar, becomes distorted; "she crossed her hands on her lap, as if she were saying lessons, and began to repeat it, but her voice sounded hoarse and strange, and the words did not come the same as they used to do" [1:38]. The Symbolic order no longer guarantees coherence.Alice also clings to childhood moral lessons. Confronted with the bottle labeled 'Drink Me', she recalls cautionary tales about poison: "No, I'll look first and see whether it's marked 'poison' or not; for she had read several nice stories about children who got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they would not remember the simple rules their friends taught them" [1:31]. Yet upon drinking, she undergoes radical transformation—shrinking "like a telescope" [1:32]—which defies her expectations of cause and effect. Similarly, rules of social etiquette collapse here: The Hatter, White Rabbit or Caterpillar disregard politeness, destabilizing her belief in social conventions. When the Hatter says "Your hair wants cutting," Alice says with severity "You should learn not to make personal remarks [...] It's very rude.'" [1:90]. While she addresses Caterpillar as "Sir" and talks "very politely" [1:65], it always gives her orders like "Come back!" [1:66]. Language itself, the foundation of the Symbolic order, loses reliability. Animals and even objects speak with authority. Communication collapses into absurdity: When they get wet in the pool of tears, the mouse says that he will 'dry' them and he begins to tell the 'driest' story he knows and he says "I'll soon make you dry enough! […] Are you ready? This is the driest thing I know." [1:44-45]. The Mouse's "dry" story means to dry clothes. At the mad tea party the Hatter asks a riddle—"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" [1:91-94]—which has no answer. These episodes highlight the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relation, revealing the fragility of meaning. Thus, as Alice tries to impose logic on a world structured by unstable signifiers, she confronts the limitations of Symbolic knowledge.

4. The Shattering of the Ego and the Fragmented Body

As Alice's frameworks collapse, her sense of identity begins to disintegrate. She experiences alienation so profound that she questions her identity: "'Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!'" [1:37]. When pressed to "Explain yourself," Alice admits, "I can't explain myself … but I'm not myself" [1:65]. Her ego, constructed through external images and Symbolic discourses, fails to provide stability. Even when the White Rabbit mistakes her for his housemaid Mary Ann, Alice accepts her new role:

Very soon the Rabbit noticed Alice, as she was hunting about, and called out to her, in an angry tone, 'Why, Mary Ann, what are you doing out here? Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan! Quick now!' 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. [1:53]

When she accepts her new role as Mary Ann, she loses her name as the last sign of her identity, underscoring the instability of identity in a world of constant transformation. Alice's acceptance of a new identity is not surprising because nothing is permanent or stable here; shapes, sizes and identities constantly change. A child turns into a pig: "The baby grunted again and Alice looked very anxiously into his face … This time there could be no mistake about it: it was neither more nor less than a pig" [1:85]. Then Alice notices that "the pebbles were

all turning into little cakes" [1:60]. For the inhabitants of Wonderland, especially for the Caterpillar, change or transformation is nothing surprising:

"'For I can't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.' 'It isn't,' said the Caterpillar. 'Well, perhaps you haven't found it yet,' said Alice; 'but 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?' 'Not a bit,' said the Caterpillar." [1:65] .

Alice's identity crisis is symbolized by uncontrollable bodily transformations as well. Her changes in size leave her alienated from her own body: "'Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now?'" [1:35-36]. In the mirror stage, the "whole" body image provides illusory unity as Lacan puts it:

"This image is functionally essential for man, in that it provides him with the orthopaedic complement of that native insufficiency, constitutive confusion or disharmony, that is linked to his prematurity at birth. He will never be completely unified precisely because this is brought about him in an alienating way, in the form of a foreign image which institutes an original psychical function." [4:95].

This unity, as Lacan explains, is fragile, since the ego is "the armor of an alienating identity" the child wears in front of the mirror [2:4]. Its fragility causes the fear of fragmentation and this fear "usually manifests itself in dreams [...] It appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions" [2:4]. Alice's bodily growth dramatizes the fear of fragmentation that underlies this illusory identity.Even when normal-sized, she quarrels with herself: "'Come, there's no use in crying like that!' said Alice to herself rather sharply. 'I advise you to leave off this minute!' She generally gave herself very good advice" [1:33]. She even punishes herself, recalling once boxing her own ears. Alice is a curious child who is "very fond of pretending to be two people" [1:33]. As Lacan states:

"If the aggression relation enters into this formation called ego, it's because it is constitutive of it, because the ego is already by itself another, and because it sets itself up in a duality internal to the subject. The ego is the master the subject finds in another, whose function of mastery he establishes in his own heart." [4:93].

For Lacan, this self-division reflects the ego's alienated structure; the subject is bound to the Other, such that the self becomes an internalized "other". Alice's self-dialogues illustrate the ego's inherent duality. Through these episodes, Carroll dramatizes Lacan's insight that the ego is unstable—both a misrecognition and a fragile construct vulnerable to collapse when confronted with the unconscious.

5. Alice as Authority and the Imposition of Order

Although often portrayed as a victim and called "Poor Alice" [1:36], Alice also acts as an authority figure here. As a representative of the Symbolic order, she not only interprets but also imposes meaning on Wonderland. Despite confusion, she repeatedly enforces upper-world "book of rules" [1:30]; she scolds others for rudeness or insists on politeness [1:91]. She is even a threat for the inhabitants of Wonderland, drawing her foot down the chimney and kicking the Lizard out [1:59]. Ultimately, she rejects Wonderland outright: "Who cares for you?

You're nothing but a pack of cards!" [1:152]. Naming and categorizing, she attempts to reassert order.Yet this reveals the relativity of meaning or order. What Alice deems chaos is coherent for Wonderland's inhabitants. The Cheshire Cat explains: "'We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad'" [1:87]. By entering Wonderland, Alice herself becomes subject to its logic. Her efforts to stabilize meaning reveal not the disorder of Wonderland, but the fragility of the Symbolic order she embodies.

6. Conclusion

In "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", Carroll presents a narrative that, while playful, dramatizes profound psychoanalytic concerns. Through Lacanian theory, Alice's journey illustrates the fragility of the ego, the instability of identity, and the arbitrariness of meaning when confronted with the unconscious. Her bodily transformations, dialogues with herself, and eventual alienation resonate with Lacan's notion of the fragmented body and the alienated ego. Her attempts to impose order expose not the disorder of Wonderland but the relativity of order itself. What appears nonsensical to Alice is logical within its own context. Ultimately, Wonderland functions as a satirical mirror of the Symbolic order, revealing its arbitrary, illusory, nonsense and meaningless principles and conventions. Alice's failure to transcend the Wonderland's chaos underscores Lacan's insight that the subject remains bound to the Other, unable to escape the constitutive forces of language and desire. Far from a mere fantasy story for children, Carroll's text reveals the formative stages of identity, dramatizing the fragile foundations upon which the self is built.

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