Representation of Victorian childhood/ the female protagonist in

Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*

In both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), Lewis Carroll (otherwise known as Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), had inscribed his acknowledgement of Alice Liddell – as being the real muse behind his fictional ‘Alice’. Indeed the story orally told to three little girls during a boat-ride on the golden afternoon of 4th July 1863, its subsequent transcription into a hand-written and hand-illustrated book by Carroll and its final publication as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, has become a famous literary anecdote. The very fact that a child was the chief inspiration for the story makes both the *Alice* books child-centric texts. The child is the protagonist around whom both the stories take shape. Thus the figure of the child and Carroll’s perceptions of the varied norms of contemporary Victorian childhood are important aspects in both the *Alice* stories.

In *Through the Looking Glass*, the fictional Alice is seven and half years of age, revealed in her conversation with Humpty Dumpty. The second book is has a more protracted engagement with the theme of growing up, especially when seen from the point of view of Alice’s dream journey – where she begins as a pawn and is finally crowned as the Queen. Alice has been read as a novel bildungsroman because of her dream journey, her gradual progress through adversities that finally ends in acquiring power. The poems bracketing the text also underline the themes of growing up and the anxieties of that inevitable process.

The text begins with Alice seated in the comfort of her family’s plush drawing room, in conversation with the kitty. Her surroundings, the way she is dressed and her constant flow of conversation with her furry companion, locate Alice as an upper-middle-class female child, ensconced within the comfortable but restrictive material protections and moral codes of her home and society. Her favourite pastime is ‘role-playing’ and the text opens with Alice playing the ‘adult’ to the child ‘kitty’. This affords the reader a glimpse into the norms of Victorian childhood, into the ideas of upbringing and discipline and expected behavioural codes of the ‘good’ child during the Victorian times. Nina Auerbach points out, Victorian concepts of the child tended to “swing back and forth between extremes of original innocence and original sin: Rousseau and Calvin stood side by side in the nursery.” It was believed that “children should be seen and not heard” and practices of punishments and rewards in order to discipline a child were in vogue.

However, Carroll’s depiction of Alice is much more complex and endearingly ‘realistic’ when compared to the straightjacketed stereotype of the ‘good Victorian child’. In fact, Carroll’s portraiture is a critique of the contemporary strictures of childhood, a critique that is enabled through the topsy-turvy world of Nonsense in Alice’s dream. In a later article titled ‘Alice on Stage’, Carroll writes about his ‘dream Alice’:

Loving, first, loving and gentle: loving as a dog (forgive the prosaic simile, but I know no earthly love so pure and perfect), and gentle as a fawn: then courteous–courteous to all […] trustful, ready to accept the wildest impossibilities with all that utter trust that only dreamers know; and lastly, curious–wildly curious […]!

In both the *Alice* texts, Alice stands forth with all these qualities. While curiosity and an eagerness to please define her core characteristics, like a fairy-tale heroine on a journey, she is resourceful, sensitive, polite and kind. She has the ready sense to encounter all the ‘adversities’ on her journey and to reach her goal of becoming the Queen. Thus, in contrast to the understated Victorian norms, Alice as the protagonist of the book, takes her own decisions, makes her own choices, voices her own opinions and dominates when the need arises, at the end of the book. [Textual examples]

Victorian pedagogy and education come under Carroll’s critical lens in the *Alice* books. He uses Alice’s conversations with the characters of Looking Glass Land to reveal the highly moral and didactic nature of Victorian children’s books. One of the chief aims of Victorian education was to train young boys and girls to grow up to be ‘gentlemen’ and ‘angels in the house’. Carroll clearly points out the uselessness of such education, as the rote learning cannot help Alice in any way along her journey. By using characters from nursery rhymes, folklore and board games and in characterizing Alice as a child endowed with a lively imagination, Carroll, like Dickens in *Hard Times*, underlines the dire necessity of imagination in educating a child.

In his depiction of the child, Carroll, through the brilliance of his literary Nonsense, is able to question the basic ‘markers’ of identity like age, shape, name and memory.

[Discuss examples form the text.] All these ‘fixed’ markers become increasingly fluid and absurd as the tale progresses. Finally, there is the disturbing, lingering question of “Which dreamed it?” that baffles the readers in its possibilities of multiple truths rather than a single one.

Carroll’s Alice represents both normative Victorian childhood and a rebellion against its ‘nonsensical’ strictures. The world of dreams – with its talking animals, nursery rhyme characters and live chessmen, empower the child in the heart of the text. Thus Lewis Carroll’s Nonsense enables him to break the boundaries of the social codes and to celebrate the liberation of the child. It is worthwhile to note that such a carefree liberation is not possible within the ‘realistic’ premises of a novel like *Jane Eyre*. Thus Nonsense for Carroll is not only a technique, but a magic genre which allows him to question the prevalent norms of childhood and to set forth new ideas of the child.