

Tea Time at Wonderland. Domestic models and family relationships over the looking glass

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Abstract. The character of Alice, the English “dream child” of the second half of the 19th century, was born from the fantasy of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, best known with the nom de plume Lewis Carroll. In her travels Alice does not look for a new family to substitute hers, but for her own freedom of being and knowing herself through an initiation path. *Alice – Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found* (1871) – is a masterpiece of nonsense only on its surface, because actually it has an underground, which makes it able to see from a child’s point of view and to understand what being a child means in a world ruled by petulant, unreliable and rude adults. Alice represents the great metaphor of the escape; she leaves her family through escaping to somewhere else, which brings her to an inner adventure in the depths of being. In the novels of Carroll the reader can find everyday life themes, such as the domesticity, being a mother and taking care, but in an upside-down and paradoxical way.

Keywords. Lewis Carroll; Children’s Literature; Pedagogy of Family; History of Pedagogy; Gender Pedagogy; Victorian Age; Domesticity; Underground.

“Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversations?’”
(Carroll 2009, p. 9)

1. Dear Alice...

Thanks to the references to yesterday and today’s books, children’s literature seems to lead us into a complex and subterranean hermeneutic travel *through* and *beyond the looking glasses*, where just the great novels invite us to enter. The variety of interpretations and the close net of connections of texts are borders and temporary thresholds for an exploration, which talks with the imaginary, cherished by the history of children’s literature.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson invented the character of *Alice*, the “dream-child”¹ (Carroll 2004, p. 67), in the second half of the 19th century in England.

He was born in 1832 and was the eldest son and the third of eleven children. When he was twenty-four and started to write for the “Comic Times”, he adopted the nom de plume Lewis Carroll honouring his mother’s surname – Lutwidge-Ludovic-Louis-Lewis and Charles-Carolus-Carroll (D’Amico 1991; D’Amico 1985).

His father was the stern curate and the archdeacon-to-be of Richmond Charles Dodgson. He wielded “his indisputable power as a Victorian householder” (D’Amico 1991, p. 9) on his son. The author of *Alice* tried to embrace the ecclesiastic career to follow in his father’s footsteps, but because of his poor vocation, or because of his stammers and shyness, he gave up and didn’t take orders.

Charles Ludwidge, who will be called Lewis Carroll from now on, had been organizing games and amusements for his younger brothers and sisters since his childhood. He became an expert of linguistic enigmas; he invented games following their own rules, which he wrote out on comics for household use and illustrated with funny pictures, such as, for example, the most famous “The Rectory Umbrella” (1850-1853). His works were characterised by “verbal games, limericks, nonsense, which were often influenced by Edward Lear, whose work *Book of Nonsense* was written in the 30’s in order to amuse Lord Derby’s children and published in 1846” (D’Amico 1991, p. 33).

It is not hard to find familiar anticipations of his popular stories, and even a repertoire, which he would have often pulled in the future from, in his early comics (D’Amico 1991; Hudson 1981; Leach 1981).

After becoming a life member of the University College of Christ Church in Oxford, where he got a secure job, but forced to celibacy and orders, he met the dean of the College, Henry George Liddell. In 1855 he met Alice Liddell and her sisters, Lorina and Charlotte. This meeting marked his life forever, giving birth to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found* (1871), which are two of the most famous and beloved works of children’s literature.

Alice is the British curious and brave child-heroine par excellence and represents the childhood as escapist from everyday life; she escapes to an imaginative somewhere else through signs and dreams.

As *The Little Prince* seems to remind us, curiosity is child. It is the great impulse to know that children have got and it meets the need to make sense of things and of the world (Grilli 2008; Beseghi 2011). Childhood does not waive the desire and the need to know. Children ask questions about what is behind the door, over the rainbow or beyond the mirror. Childhood feels that there is something hidden behind something else; that there is another world and beings under the grass and among the roots of a tree, and only who is really curious and seeks using their heart will see what is hidden. As the “child with a good eyesight” (King 1985, p. 148) reminds us, what is essential is invisible to the eye.

¹ “The dream-child moving through a land/of wonders wild and new” (Carroll 2004, p. 67).

2. A mad tea-party. Domesticity and irony in the *underground*

Lands such as “Wonderland” and the one “through the looking-glass” are for Alice, and for Lewis Carroll himself, a nest, a den, an imaginary land where you can be yourself and find again your own true identity.

In her travels Alice does not look for a new family to substitute hers, but for her own freedom of being and knowing herself through an initiation path. She never completely strays from her everyday life, but she distorts it through poems and quotes remembering in an odd way what she has learnt. It seems as her mind unconsciously has adapted to the strange world where she is.

There are some “familiar” and “domestic” elements in this novel, e.g. the convention of the afternoon tea at a fixed hour, as it happens to Alice when she comes back from Wonderland:

« ‘Wake up, Alice dear!’ said her sister. ‘Why, what a long sleep you’ve had!’
 ‘Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!’ said Alice [...]
 ‘It was a curious dream, dear, certainly; but now run in to your tea: it’s getting late’» (Carroll 1993, p. 121).

This convention also appears in the “Nonsense world”, when Alice meets the Hatter, the Dormouse and the March Hare drinking tea, *A Mad Tea-Party*² (Carroll 1993, pp. 70-78), and spending time, even if the Hatter is already *murdering it*³ (Carroll 1993, p. 74). The tea convention is not new to Alice’s everyday life, but here it is eccentric and weird. Differently from other little girls living other adventures, such as Dorothy (Baum 2012), Alice does not meet “substitute adults” on her way, substantial new and better parental figures, who show her the safe path and take her to her destination. During her *Adventures* she meets talking rabbits, eccentric caterpillars giving advices, vain flowers, pig-children, cats without smiles and smiles without cats, children as big as huge eggs and huge eggs as big as children.

Lewis Carroll did not foreshadow a “traditional family” contextualised in the Victorian age he lived in, but an “ideal” one, where Alice Liddell and her mates become the centre of a new form of family: a chosen family formed by equal people close to him and to his way of living.

Carroll paid a “customised” attention to his younger interlocutors: “the most of them was doubtless won by being treated equally [...] and not as an imperfect, immature and repressible object, i.e. how childhood was seen during the Victorian age” (D’Amico 1991, p. 99; Almansi 1974).

With its several interpretations, *Alice* is a masterpiece of nonsense only on its surface, because actually it has an *underground*⁴, which makes it able to see from a child’s

² This refers to chapter VII, *A Mad Tea-Party*, when Alice meets the March Hare, the Hatter and the Dormouse (Carroll 1993, pp. 70-78).

³ “Well, I’d hardly finished the first verse,” said the Hatter, “when the Queen bawled out ‘He’s murdering the time! Off with his head!’” This is one of Carroll’s many puns: “killing time” also means “spending time” (Carroll 1993, p. 74).

⁴ This refers to the volume *Alice’s Adventures under Ground* (1863). Lewis Carroll sent a copy of it to Alice Liddell the following year. After that the story was reviewed by Carroll himself, and the book was published

point of view and to understand what being a child means in a world ruled by petulant, unreliable and rude adults.

The underground is a *topos* of children's literature and reappears with its scaring and disturbing, or weird and nonsense, or safe and protective *other* places, where the characters have to do down or up; or where they are trapped sometimes, before they can come back to the real world. Through caves and *labyrinths* (Antoniazzi 2007), which symbolise a self-examination, we reach Alice, the "ideal child"⁵ who is the main character of an unconscious saga.

Whether this underground is subterranean among the tree roots, or submarine, you always leave or lose a part of yourself in it to get a symbolic key to open the doors of a new fate. An example is the young mermaid⁶ (Andersen 2005), who gives up to her voice for love in order to go to the dry land with new limbs; a little girl⁷ (Miyazaki-Studio Ghibli 1988; Trisciuzzi 2013) falls among the roots of a camphor tree and reaches the den of Totoro, a fantastic creature who protects the wood and whom she entrusts it her fears and torments for cure and protection to. Another character⁸ (Miyazaki-Studio Ghibli 2001; Trisciuzzi 2013) finds herself in the world of the dead, where the spirits of nature are, and gives a piece of her identity to a witch in order to save her parents, who are under a spell because of their own voracity.

3. The deconstruction of the Victorian family

The young character escapes from her reality, and maybe she dreams of reaching *another* weird and original world. But its originality is compared with the Victorian age, when the *Adventures* took shape. During this age children were considered as imperfect and every teacher tried to make them become adults as soon as possible (Lasdun 1982; Lasdun 1986; Daiches 1989; Bacchetti 1997). Moreover, the bourgeois thought children were weak creatures to be protected, nice accessories to be shown, whose personality was not important. There is a saying: "Children should be seen and not be heard" (Kohlke 2011, p. 132).

Alice can be considered as the first novel completely written on the side of childhood and in complicity with it. The characters of the stories are not strange children to the young readers and are created according to the adults' wrong idea of childhood. Childhood finds itself anew and revises its fears, and the stories reflect the child's unconscious: the reader faces the problems, escapes from the adversities and is afraid of not being able to make it, as sometimes the character does, and judges the odd adults' world with its rules. Thanks to *Alice*, the young readers delegitimize and deconstruct the adults' world and its conformism.

"The aim of childhood [...] was to enrich the soul with the fundamental principles of Christianity, such as mercy, generosity, moderation, humbleness, honesty and purity. Thanks to a series of writings addressed to parents, teachers, nannies, this surge of morality and religiosity

in 1865 with the title *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the illustrations by John Tenniel.

⁵This is C. L. Dodgson's definition for Alice Liddell.

⁶This refers to the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen.

⁷This refers to the character of Mei (*My Neighbor Totoro*) [Original title: *Tonari no Totoro*].

⁸This refers to the character of Chihiro (*Spirited Away*) [Original title: *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*].

penetrated the nurseries. There were treatises about holy subjects, handbooks and texts about education, [...]. But some writings also addressed to children. Children's literature was more and more spread and contributed towards inculcating religious and moral principles. [...] The first moral lessons were taught from the spelling books, where there were moral writings under the illustrations [...] in these books adults are always shown as moral and children as bad and needed to be saved" (Lasdun 1986, p. 31).

Alice gives an upturned interpretation of childhood in the Victorian age, the world is seen from another not conventional and stereotyped point of view, where adults are not moral and the characters do not need to be saved. The self-satisfied Victorian world with its rules and institutions is estranged, deconstructed and parodied⁹ (Tosi, Paruolo 2011, p. 185). This novel is in conflict with the literature of its age and is considered as a work of nonsense, but it makes a lot of sense. Differently from the previous children's literature, *Alice* is an "anarchic novel, where authority is shown as despotic, petulant and intolerant; where the institutions are understandable and not fair; where the divine is not even named" (D'Amico 1991, p. 29).

During her adventures Alice, "polite little girl" (Wullschläger 1995, p. 50), lives in two extraordinary lands ruled by an eccentric anarchy, where she keeps on looking for a sense and an order; she never stops, or gives up, and keeps on going ahead and look for her destiny, even if the these worlds and their inhabitants are weird and puzzle her.

The readers "are scared, astonished, puzzled, surprised, perplexed, but they still feel like to know" (Faeti 2010, p. 60), as Alice does.

She is very curious and always tries to understand, listening and thinking, discovering new ways to define the world, which is unique, original and always changes, and where logic follows its own eccentric path.

Alice searches a new identity, because she is confused about hers. She tries to understand asking whom she finds on her way. Moreover, the centre of Carroll's masterpiece is the sudden and uncontrollable change of oneself, the feeling to get bigger and bigger in few moments and in a place and time without rules:

« 'Curiouser and curiouser!' cried Alice [...]

'Now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!' (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off). [...]

She sat down and began to cry again.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' said Alice, 'a great girl like you,' (she might well say this), 'to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!'» (Carroll 1993, pp. 24-25).

At the beginning she was obedient and sure about what was socially "suitable" (or what the society of her time taught it was); she is seven when she goes to "Wonderland" and seven and a half when she goes "through the looking-glass". During her travels she finds out new forms of thought, new ways of being and living *in and out of the family*.

⁹ "Every time little Alice is the spokeswoman of the Victorian thought, she is suddenly wrong-footed by the adult's rudeness and irrationality" (Tosi, Paruolo 2011, p. 185).

4. Being lost in the absurd. When it was only the pepper

In her travels Alice meets crabby characters, such as the Queen of Hearts, the Duchess and the Hatter in “Wonderland”, or very incompetent and bizarre ones, such as the White Queen in “through the looking-glass world”.

Playing is really important in these novels and defines the structure of society of “Wonderland”, which is mostly formed by a pack of cards. Court cards represent aristocracy – e.g. the Queen and the King of Hearts. Low cards are classified according to their suits. Spades (Gardner 2015) – this word has a double meaning in English: it also refers to a tool for gardening – are the gardeners; clubs – which also refers to a sport equipment – are the soldiers; diamonds – gems – are the courtiers; and the hearts are the Queen and King of Hearts’ children, ten little princes: “there were ten of them, and the little dears came jumping merrily along hand in hand, in couples: they were all ornamented with hearts” (Carroll 1993, p. 80).

The structure of the land “through the looking glass” is based on the role of chess, and croquet is the favourite game of the Red Queen.

In her first adventure in “Wonderland” Alice is forced to play croquet with the Queen of Hearts; otherwise she will be beheaded.

Playing croquet with flamingos, hedgehogs and soldiers instead of clubs, balls and conventional goals could be possible, if they would behave like the items they represent. But everyone behaves as they like in Wonderland, without following any rule, and playing is impossible because anarchy and incompetency are incompatible with it (Leprì 2013). Rules have to be followed.

Maybe, the only rule is that the Queen has to win. In his article *Alice on stage* Lewis Carroll describes her “as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury” (Gardner 2015, n. 43, p. 139). After all, her favourite sentences are “off with her head” and “off with his head”. The Queen forces her supremacy, her taste, her power to decide and her thought on everything and everyone, beheading those people who think differently. It is no accident that the author chose the beheading, the separation between the head and the body. She shows her power to the world beheading every dissident.

Alice gets angry and bored, and she realises that that game makes no sense for her, together with the whole Wonderland and its inhabitants, but she tries all the same. She is stubborn and curious, clever and sometimes even impudent. She tries to follow the rules of that world and occasionally accepts its anarchy, trying to “keep her feet to the ground”¹⁰ (Carroll 1993, p. 151) and her identity. In her adventure her thought takes different paths from the ones the adults of that time would have managed it. Carroll, who is an extraordinary piper, leads Alice and the readers to *somewhere else*, where the thought diverges – the one of its ironical inhabitants first (Beseghi 1998) – and everything is different and unconventional. Its inhabitants are *differently thinking* and seem to see the world from *another* point of view, thinking in an upside-down, extravagant and not standardised way, which is

¹⁰ “She just kept the tips of her fingers on the hand-rail, and floated gently down without even touching the stairs with house her feet; then she floated on through the hall, and would have gone straight out at the door in the same way, if she hadn’t caught hold of the doorpost. She was getting a little giddy with so much floating in the air, and was rather glad to find herself walking again in the natural way” (Carroll 1993, p. 151).

different from the one of who can find a moral in everything (Carroll 1993, p. 89).

Alice is more and more curious and nostalgically looks for the domestic. She finds it parodied in the Duchess's kitchen.

Since the mother duties were not part of aristocratic women's life, Carroll proposes an absurd, but token, scene of what might have happened to a aristocratic woman (in this case the Duchess), if she would have tried to take care of her children, which was a nanny's duty. When Alice meets the Duchess for the second time, she is totally changed, she is quieter and less angry than when they met in the Duchess's house (Cantatore 2015). But, as it is said, "it was only the pepper" (Carroll 1993 p. 89).

Examining the several and contrasting studies on Lewis Carroll and his works, you can also find the point of view of Phyllis Greenacre, a well-known psychoanalyst from New York who wrote a psychoanalytic essay on this author (1995). In her essay Greenacre supposes that Carroll identified Alice with his mother. In his *Introduction to The Annotated Alice* Martin Gardner states that: "In the *Alice* books the most obvious mother symbols, the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen, are heartless creatures, whereas the King of Hearts and the White King, both likely candidates for father symbols, are amiable fellows. Suppose, however, we give all this a looking-glass reversal and decide that Carroll had an unresolved Oedipus complex. Perhaps he identified little girls with his mother so that Alice herself is the real mother symbol" (Gardner 2000, p. 8).

5. Move to the end. The inner adventure towards the growth

Alice has always had an active role facing the obstacles she found in her path, reacting, asking, criticising and even protesting. Sometimes her interlocutors called her a stupid, even if she always answers after thinking and never seems to be dull. She well uses her perspicacity and cleverness.

Through the use of poems and puns, Alice tries to follow, or better, *to chase*, the sense as she had done with the White Rabbit. She chases her curiosity, her desire for the world of the unknown, and she is full of questions¹¹ (Carroll, 1993, p. 67). Alice represents the great metaphor of the escape; she leaves her family through escaping to *somewhere else*, which brings her to an inner adventure in the depths of being. In the novels of Carroll the reader can find everyday life themes, such as the domesticity, being a mother and taking care, but in an upside-down and paradoxical way.

In the XIX century *Alice*, and the childhood it represents, claims the right of thinking for oneself: the little girl's most known line is: "I've a right to think" forcefully said to the Duchess, the symbol of the greatest authority of an adult who always tries to teach and give a moral, even when there is none.

¹¹ Alice asks philosophical-existential questions trying to sort out her doubts, as she does when she talks with the Cheshire Cat: «Cheshire Puss,' she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. 'Come, it's pleased so far,' thought Alice, and she went on. 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?' 'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat. 'I don't much care where-' said Alice. 'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat. '- so long as I get *somewhere*,' Alice added as an explanation. 'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough'» (Carroll 1993, p. 67).

“Adults are points of reference no more; they mistake or disappear, families have got problems, children run away and find themselves alone. But their solitude is full of freedom and the dangers become formative stages” (Hamelin 2007, p. 184). Using Bianca Pitzorno’s words, Alice is “the symbol of a free childhood and disrespectful, which travels in a universe not completely convincing” (1982, p. X). If she comes back home after her adventures in two weird worlds she cannot understand¹² (Tosi, Paruolo 2011, p. 185), her journey has not been a “false movement” (Pitzorno 1987, p. 64), even if was a “dream” one. When everything was turning around her, she did not stop, but she faced an intellectual adventure, which changed her. As we can guess from the last poem from *Through the Looking-Glass*, Carroll knows that Alice – “his Alice”, his playmate Alice Liddell – is growing and becoming an adult, a “Queen”. This transition to adulthood will put an end to their friendship.

Lewis Carroll knows he cannot accompany her, as the White Knight in the “through the looking glass” world because, once “over that little brook”, Alice will become a woman:

« ‘I don’t want to be anybody’s prisoner. I want to be a Queen.’
 ‘So you will, when you’ve crossed the next brook,’ said the White Knight. ‘I’ll see you safe to the end of the wood – and then I must go back, you know. That’s the end of my move.’ [...]
 ‘You’ve only a few yards to go,’ he said, ‘down the hill and over that little brook, and then you’ll be a Queen -’ » (Carroll 1993, pp. 224-225).

The White Knight knows – or hopes – that when Alice is a Queen and the dream is over, she will remember the song he sang her when she was a child and of her playmate Knight Carroll-Dodgson.

The critics (Gardner 2015, pp. 280-282) propose that the character of the White Knight is Carroll himself. The gentleman, who can not ride, is characterised by the author’s odd inventions and protective attitude. Differently from most of the characters Alice met, he is gloomily loving. As the White Knight does, Carroll hopes that they will have good memories of the days spent going by boat, playing and laughing: “Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey through the Looking-Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly. Years afterwards she could bring the whole scene back again, as if it had been only yesterday – the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight – the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her – the horse quietly moving about, with the reins hanging loose on his neck, cropping the grass at her feet – and the black shadows of the forest behind – all this she took in like a picture, as, with one hand shading her eyes, she leant against a green, watching the strange pair, and listening, in a half dream, to the melancholy music of the song” (Carroll 1993, pp. 233-234).

¹² The first novel by Carroll begins with a fall “which can also have mythical connotations – you get knowledge thanks to the fall” (Tosi, Paruolo 2011, p. 185).

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