Identifying the Real Alice: The Replacement of Feminine Innocence with Masculine Anxiety

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Abstract

The story of Alice, who once wandered through Wonderland and Looking-Glass House, outgrew its covers long ago. The characters she met on those original adventures, which seemed so vibrant and alive when Lewis Carroll first wrote them into a black-and-white, type-faced existence, have since sprung from the page in color, in computer-generated animation, and in live-action under the guidance of artistic visionaries Walt Disney and Tim Burton. Although these men have changed the method of delivery, the characterization of Alice and the basic plot of the story, they have all retained a personal connection to the character, and oftentimes the other changes that each creator makes to the story serves to amplify his own personal affiliation with the character.
Introduction: Constructing Characters and Public Personas

“It’s the wrong Alice!” squeaks the Dormouse in Tim Burton’s 2010 production of *Alice in Wonderland*, and to any lover of Lewis Carroll’s children’s story, it is. Burton’s Alice is older, more adventurous and a visitor to Underland, not Wonderland. This Alice does not stumble down the rabbit hole accidentally, but willingly dives in after the White Rabbit. She escapes from a marriage proposal, not from boredom. In Burton’s version of *Alice in Wonderland*, reality sits much closer to the surface of Alice’s supernatural adventures than it does in Carroll’s classic books. The audience never forgets that Alice is hurtling toward a life-changing resolution, hoping to discover something crucial about herself before the time runs out and she finds herself trapped in marriage to the boring British lord Hamish for the rest of her life.

Just as Burton magnifies Alice’s desperation, Walt Disney exaggerates her insipidness in his 1951 feature-length animation. This retelling of *Alice* at first appears to faithfully follow the plot of Carroll’s book but it quickly becomes clear that Disney’s heroine lacks any self-sufficiency. Both Alices cry, but in Disney, her tears do not even provide her with a means to escape until the talking doorknob swallows the river she has made, carrying her with it. Once in Wonderland, Alice continues following, rather than leading or even aimlessly wandering. She always pursues something—the White Rabbit, the directions of the Cheshire cat, a path in the woods. Even when these directions lead her astray, the audience never worries about her well-being because, as the subtle environmental clues provided at the beginning of the movie indicated, she has safely fallen into sleep.

The original Alice, the protagonist of Charles Dodgson *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, can be characterized as both urgent and insipid, as should be expected. She was, after all, the original. But Carroll
managed to strike a balance in her character, making her proper and retiring, yet curious and assertive. His Alice clearly represents the typical mid-upperclass Victorian girl. She is accustomed to having her own way but she is also used familiar with the confining social customs of her society. A veil of nostalgia already rests over this Alice, giving the reader the feeling that, soon, this fanciful adventure will fade into the memory of a well-rounded, well-adjusted woman, who is ready to assume the duties of wife and mother.

Each of these Alices has a unique character that differentiates her from all of the others and allows her to navigate the specific circumstances that her creator places her in. By exaggerating some aspects of Alice’s personality and eliminating others, each creator alters Alice’s character so that it fulfills the personal purpose that caused him to tell the story in the first place. Lewis Carroll imagined a prim and proper Alice closely related to the Victorian culture whose rigidness he had so much trouble accepting. Disney’s Alice, on the other hand, lacks an assertive personality that epitomizes the passive innocence he and the Disney corporation built into an empire while they were struggling for financial security after WWII. Fifty years later, Burton reacted against Disney’s sanitized Alice by infusing the character with a sort of madness, as if her society, like his, had been too constrictive to handle. Iterating Alice in so many different ways emphasizes the flexibility of her character, and indicates that the form of each Alice merely depends on the man who engineered that version of her story. Therefore, looking at the way Alice interacts with her world in each retelling should impart some information about how each man interacted with his own environment.

Of course, drawing any sort of conclusion about the relationship between the character and the creator can be tricky. Personal papers, interviews and biographical information can create strong links between the creator and the created, but there will always remain some
question about the validity of the creator’s public persona when compared with his private life. Interestingly, the way the general public perceives Lewis Carroll, Walt Disney and Tim Burton offers at least as many possibilities for analysis as their private personalities would have, if the two are, in fact, drastically different. The public image of the creators is, to some extent, manipulated by the information that they, or the executors of their estate, desire to become available to the masses. Whether or not the personalities they present are true representations of their internal lives, or are merely stage personas, is irrelevant for the sake of my argument. If any of the three creative minds being discussed was, in fact, building a façade of creative inspiration to hide behind, it seems unlikely that that persona would be so drastically different from his private life that the two would have no influence on one another. Information obtained by analyzing any creator’s work through the lens he has constructed reflects the image that he wished the audience to see. In turn that analysis, if nothing else, exposes the psychology that he finds the most interesting.

In the cases of Lewis Carroll and Walt Disney, this situation has been altered, at least to some extent, by their deaths. Posthumous release of personal papers, such as the Diaries and Letters of Lewis Carroll, offers additional insight into the private lives of these authors. But as helpful as this information may prove to any critic attempting to determine the author’s relationship to his creative work, there are still some difficulties. For one thing, any letter written, although not meant for a public eye, was meant to be read and evaluated by another human being, and for this reason the writer (here, Lewis Carroll) felt compelled to filter his words for the appropriate audience. In addition, the publication of Carroll’s Diaries reveals some, although not much, personal information that had not been disclosed during his lifetime. Carroll rarely used his diary to record emotions or deeply personal events. Mostly, they simply
serve as a record of his social engagements and the progress of his academic projects. They offer an interesting look into Carroll’s daily routines, and how he conformed to the Victorian social system. Not all of Carroll’s many papers were saved or published by his family members. Some were merely uninteresting, and the sheer number of the documents made it impractical to salvage them all. It appears that his executors edited the papers only in a few places, a motivation which appears to have stemmed from family pride more than from a need to prevent Carroll’s reputation from being damaged.

Walt Disney has also passed away, leaving his personal papers, including much of the creative property produced by himself and his creative team, in the possession of his family and his corporation. The Disney archives currently hold records of much of the history but are not open for general admittance, although companies and researchers may gain some access to the information. The Disney Corporation determines what new information about the founder and the history of the company is released at any time, as this information may affect public opinions of the company as a whole. Disney’s prominence in modern America has elicited several distinct kinds of attention, among biographers as well as the general public. He and his company have been referred to as a “triumph of the American imagination” by Neal Gabler and as an “original” by Bob Thomas. Marc Eliot, on the other hand, calls him a “dark prince” and accuses him of having a brooding, grotesque interior life. Many biographies about Walt Disney reflect the personal opinion that the writer has of the Disney company. The conflicting connotations they bring to the events of Disney’s life confuses his own voice, although it does not change the actual events of his life, or the various successes and failures of the Disney corporation’s productions.
As of the writing of this thesis, director Tim Burton is still very much alive. The analysis of his work conducted later in this paper has been based solely on the persona Burton has relayed to the public. Although there are not many details known about his youth, Burton has discussed much about his early interests and how those pastimes have influenced him mentally, emotionally and creatively. The persona Burton expresses to the public, at this point, is still completely within his own hands, and information disclosed at a later date may disprove the authenticity of some facts he had previously stated as truths. And yet, even if he develops his public persona as if it were simply another character, the image he creates for himself still provides insight into his internal landscape, and connects him even more closely to his films. In an interview with David Breskin in 1991, Burton spoke about how he edits himself when speaking to the public. Just as his characters fight insurmountable external forces, Burton fights against the pressures of public adoration and public rejection. He describes himself as cagey, a character trait that helps him “fight to keep a certain kind of clarity” amongst the pressures of fame. He, like his characters, retains an inner recognition of his own identity to protect himself from the overwhelming facets of life.

When comparing these three works, there are many angles from which the critical debate can be approached. I have chosen to explore the topic from a psychoanalytic perspective, but feminist or historical approaches would also lend themselves very well to the subject matter. Another interesting avenue for debate would be to explore the imagery that each creator uses to retell the story. Because these images remain fairly consistent from remake to remake, any differences invite analysis. The way each story depicts Alice growing and shrinking, for example, changes frequently from story to story. The frequency and the purpose of her changes in size, whether or not Alice always has control over her own growth and the way that growth
affects her physical proportions all differ depending on the version of the story, and these apparently small alterations in plot can dramatically change the tone of the work. Additionally, when the Underland characters consult the Oraculum in Burton’s version, they see an illustration of Alice fighting the Jabberwock on the Frabjus day. This illustration also comes straight from Carroll’s original publication of Alice and mimics Tenniel’s original illustration.

ABOVE: ILLUSTRATOR JOHN TENNIEL’S “JABBERWOCKY” FOR CARROLL, 1871

The screenwriter of Burton’s Alice in Wonderland, Linda Woolverton claims that, when adapting the book into a movie script, she wanted to appropriate Tenniel’s Jabberwock image for the purpose of transforming the ‘boy’ into a girl, a creative choice meant to infuse a sense of feminism into the text that had not been there originally. Interestingly, the two images appear to be nearly identical. Tenniel’s drawing empowers Alice just as much as Woolverton’s updated version.

This paper is meant to define the relationships that exist between each creator previously mentioned and his unique characterization of Alice. The situations that Alice encounters in
Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* novels, as well as in the 1951 and 2010 film versions directed by Walt Disney and Tim Burton, respectively, are similar to events that have taken place in each man’s life, whether literally or metaphorically. Using the character of Alice, each man expresses his anxiety over establishing a lasting identity. The fear of societal ostracization that each man feels is reflected back onto Alice, who is subjected to varying degrees of social and physical danger.
The Reflection in the Glass: The Appearance of Lewis Carroll in *Alice*

Charles L. Dodgson, more commonly known as Lewis Carroll, could not have been aware of what he was beginning when he wrote his *Alice* books in the second half of the nineteenth century. His original goal had been to enchant young Alice Liddell with a fantastic tale, and he only wrote down the story to satisfy a passing whim. Little did he know that his action would lead to a veritable empire, with one golden-haired heroine at its center. But, as essential as Alice Liddell was when the story was first conceived, the fictional Alice quickly usurps her importance. Reading her story reveals a lot about Carroll’s relationship with Alice Liddell and a plethora of other young girls whom he referred to as his child-friends. Alice, the main character of both of Carroll’s books, appears to be empowered at the end of each work, but when the text is considered in conjunction with Lewis Carroll’s fears about acceptance and identity, it becomes clear that Carroll used Alice’s character to vent his frustration about his child-friends’ insistence on aging.

Lewis Carroll is best known as the author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and for his love of children, to which the publication of that book, and its sequel, may be attributed. Often, especially among today’s readers, Carroll’s attachment to children is considered an idyllic model for extra-familial relationships between adults and children. To his contemporaries, however, the concept of childhood was a commonplace ideal, meant to be venerated and emulated, meaning that Carroll’s own relationship with girls was not too unusual. Carroll simply related to the cult of the child that had become so popular during Victorian times but which had its roots much earlier in Western civilization.

It was not until after the 1500s that Western society began to recognize childhood as “special and separate state from adulthood” (Montgomery 51). But despite this relatively late
start, the idea had taken root by the 17th century and developed into three distinct theories about how newborn children embodied human nature. The first group, the Augustans, believed that children were innately evil and corrupt because they are completely ego-driven, caring for nothing except their own needs. Those who subscribed to the philosophical positions of the Romantic authors Thomas Traherne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, believed that children were innately good and pure, empty of any negative or sinful emotions. Between these diametrically opposed groups rested yet another faction of belief, the “Educationalists,” who believed children where highly malleable and therefore like a blank slate who would develop morality only when they experienced the world (Ezell 140). After the eighteenth century, and leading directly into the Victorian period, the concept of self and identity became much more internal, and it was believed “each individual self [had] a history,” a theory that obviously extrapolated back to childhood (Natov 4). As a result, people began to search for “the lost child” they believed lived inside of every adult, and the sentimentalized vision of children as “representative of the lost realm” took shape (Natov 4).

The Victorian cult of the child considered the child to be an innocent being in need of protection. The Romantic poets were especially pivotal in developing the idea that children acted as messengers, sent from the heavenly plain to remind adults to appreciate innocence and peace. In his well-known poem *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, William Wordsworth describes children as “apparell’d in celestial light” and accompanied by “the glory and the freshness of the dream” of the heavenly sphere from which they have only recently descended (Wordsworth 4-5). This poem, one of the most influential in defining the child’s inherent innocence, established the idea that children deserved “worshipful attentiveness on the part of adults,” if for no other reason than their ability to bring purity back to the corrupted adult world (Hulbert 18). Adults yearned
for the “golden age of purity, innocence and directness” which children represented and which they could only reach through their interactions with these heavenly messengers (Macainsh 19).

Carroll believed in the infallible innocence of childhood, adopting the Romantic view of the child as a “spiritual leader, sent from heaven” to lighten the lives of adults (Natov 49). For Carroll, as well as for many other Victorians, interacting with children was “a natural form of escapism” that offered them a refuge from the “the cold world of getting and spending” (Kincaid 67). Many Victorian adults chose to display their own innocence “through an affected and devotional love of children,” which Carroll cultivated to maintain his own reputation (Leach 16). By expressing his love for children, Carroll ensured that he would always be trusted with them, a necessity if he wished to cultivate friendships with them. Because of this reputation, and because children were considered “sexless and therefore sinless,” Carroll was able to have as many child-friends as he could make, at least until they approached adulthood and became sexualized (Woolf 150). This transitional period was the most “dangerous” part of life, and one that the Victorians viewed as “a bitter loss” to the world, since it removed one more bastion of purity from the mortal realm (Macainsh 20).

Although he would never have children of his own, Carroll was the third child, and oldest son, of the eleven children born to Reverend Charles Dodgson (Sr.) and his wife Francis (Woolf 11). Surrounded by his siblings during his younger years and responsible for their well-being after Reverend Dodgson’s death (only three of the Dodgson siblings ever married), Carroll became accustomed to the youthful, comfortable energy generated by such a large group of siblings (Woolf 19). As one of the eldest, and because of his natural tendency to entertain, it often fell on Carroll to occupy the little Dodgsons. From a very young age, he would tell stories, give recitations, perform conjuring tricks and invent games for the amusement of his siblings.
(Woolf 214). Even when he left for school at the age of 12, he continued to mail his handmade publications home for the enjoyment of his childhood companions and first appreciative audience.

Growing up in an environment teeming with children accustomed Carroll to youthful energy and strengthened his love of logic puzzles and storytelling. Throughout his adulthood, he continued to invent puzzles and games, and would sometimes remain awake late into the night simply to untangle a mathematical or logical problem. Once his siblings had grown, however, Carroll was forced to find other ways to spread his love of games, toys and stories with children. As a result, he often befriended the children of his acquaintances, as well as little girls he happened to meet on the train, the sidewalk or the beach. He would interest them with his games, stories and logic tricks. Most often, these chance meetings did not lead to full-fledged acquaintances, in which case Carroll would frequently mail a signed copy of one of his most recent publications, whether an Alice book, the Hunting of the Snark or a nonsense poem, to the child and their correspondence would die a premature death.

Occasionally, however, these meetings blossomed into true friendships and lasted for many years. On those occasions, if the child in question lived in close proximity to Carroll’s permanent residence at Christ Church or frequented one of his summer destinations, he would dedicate a great deal of time to the relationship by “borrowing” the child from her parents for excursions to the theater, lunch, or, if she was interested, to his studio to sit as a photographic model. If, on the other hand, his new acquaintance lived too far away for face-to-face meetings to be practical, Carroll would mail his new friend letters full of stories, mysterious anecdotes, logic puzzles and word games.
Many of Carroll’s best child-friends interacted with him mainly through letters and these relationships were never as publicly recognized, even after the *Letters* were published after his death. One of his earliest child-friends, Mary MacDonald, rarely enters into public discussion, but Carroll’s letters to her mother indicate that he was taking her on outings as early as 1863, when one of their excursions accidentally became more of an adventure than he had originally planned. While taking Mary around the town, the pair encountered several of Carroll’s colleagues, who delayed them from their original purpose and caused Mary to be late in returning to her parents (Carroll, *Letters* 57). Luckily for Carroll and his young friend, Ms. MacDonald apparently did not take exception to Carroll’s delinquency and the friendship continued to flourish.

In 1864, Carroll’s first letter to Mary herself appears. Full of conversation, a significant correspondence continued between the two for many more years, despite Carroll’s eventual concern that Mary was getting too old for such familiarity to be proper. In November 1867, he writes that he is “afraid [she] may have taken the opportunity to ‘grow up,’ and that [she] will turn up her nose” at his newest letter to her (Carroll, *Letters* 108). This anxiety appears, on the surface, to be merely for the sake of jest, but his use of the word “opportunity” hints that a more serious tone lies underneath the teasing exterior. This world implies that Mary can choose whether she would like to grow, or not. If being older would really cause her to forget their friendship, then the end of their correspondence would be solely her decision, determined by whether or not she chooses to grow. Carroll was already worrying about the age of his child-friends, fearing that they would lose interest in continuing correspondence with him as they grew older and had more demands on their time.
Isa Bowman was a child actress and another of Carroll’s close child-friends, although the two did not meet each other until 1887, almost twenty years after the friendship between Carroll and Mary MacDonald was coming to a close in 1867. Unlike with Mary, letter writing played only a small part in the friendship between Isa and Carroll. Instead, Isa most often appears as the subject of a large number of letters Carroll wrote to others until the early 1890s, indicating that their personal relationship unfolded face-to-face. Many more intimate details of their acquaintance, however, were later published by Isa herself. Her memoir, *Lewis Carroll As I Knew Him*, launched their relationship into the public sphere and helped to establish Carroll’s posthumous reputation as a champion of innocence and a protector of childhood. She labeled him as the “Friend of Little Children,” placing his kindness above that of any other adult.

Passages, anecdotes and off-hand remarks such as this played a large part in keeping Carroll’s attachment to children in the public sphere (Bowman 2).

Important as Carroll’s relationships with MacDonald and Bowman are for understanding the nature of his attachment to children, the most famous of Carroll’s child-friends was Alice Liddell. Their relationship created the mythos that one “golden afternoon” inspired the *Alice* books. But in reality, Alice Liddell was not one of Carroll’s closest child-friends. Normally in the habit of signing his letters very warmly, with a “very truly yours” (Carroll, *Letters* 206), a “your ever loving friend” (Carroll, *Letters* 349) or a “yours always affectionately” (Carroll, *Letters* 527), for example, the most affectionate salutation he ever wrote to the real Alice was “sincerely yours,” a send-off that was “cool indeed compared to the love and kisses he dispensed to so many of his female correspondents” (Leach 175). Despite the emotional distance between these two friends, made evident by these personal papers and others that have escaped into the public domain, many critics claim that Carroll suffered from an undying, scandalous love for
Alice Liddell. Yet, all evidence, including the accounts that circulated while Carroll was still living, provides evidence that heavily discourages of the truth of that rumor. The only special attention that Alice Liddell could claim came, not from Carroll, but from the public. After all, if Alice had never requested that Carroll write down the fanciful tale he told her one afternoon, the *Alice* books would never have been the written.

Perhaps the relationship between the “real” Alice and Carroll is so often construed as sinister because, on paper, the end of Carroll’s contact with the Liddell family occurred quite suddenly, without much forewarning or explanation (Carroll, *Diaries* 169). The Liddell family had been frequently mentioned in both Carroll’s diaries and letters until 1864, but after that time the friends had few interactions. In May 1865, several years after the “golden afternoon,” Carroll recorded a brief encounter with Alice Liddell in his diary, merely observing that, at the age of 14, she “seem[ed] changed a good deal and hardly for the better” (Carroll, *Diaries* 231). Clearly, Alice Liddell had proven to be one of the children whose maturation from child to adult fueled Carroll’s worry so much. As both her size and disregard for Carroll grew, they provoked an equal distaste for her company in him.

On November 1, 1888, Carroll notes that he had met Alice’s husband, a complete stranger to him, and he had a difficult time connecting “the new face with the olden memory—the stranger with the once-so-intimately known and loved ‘Alice,’ whom I shall always remember best as an entirely fascinating little seven-year-old maiden” (Carroll, *Diaries* 465). By putting the name Alice in quotations, Carroll leads the reader to question the identity of the Alice being referenced. Either Alice Liddell has become someone else (like Alice Hargreaves, the name she married into) or she is not the Alice that Carroll is referring to at all. The only other Alice he would always remember is the Alice from the stories, who was based loosely on Alice
Liddell as she had been at the age of seven, but ultimately remained an idyllic construction of the imagination that restricted the growth of the child.

Carroll’s relationships with Mary MacDonald, Isa Bowman and Alice Liddell all reveal his attempts to believe that children will always be children, despite the depressing truth that time continually passes. He regretted that his “child-friends [would] grow up so quick” (emphasis Carroll’s) and as a result he constantly had to determine how each child-friend’s aging would affect the relationship he had with her (Carroll, *Diaries* 527). Even when just considering the friendships he had with the three little girls previously mentioned, the larger pattern of all the relationships that he had with his child-friends becomes apparent. Very few of Carroll’s child-friends, almost all of whom were girls, remained in contact with him once they had grown into women. The reasons for this abrupt ending to the friendships were many and quite varied.

For one thing, the interests that Carroll shared with his child-friends were childish in nature. Games and stories often served as the foundation for these friendships, and many little girls outgrew their interest in these pastimes. After a certain age, they had more practical matters to think about, and did not have time or interest to spare for logic, make-believe and riddles any longer. Alice Liddell was one of these girls, and even at the time of the “golden afternoon,” which so many people consider the peak of their friendship, Alice was starting to get “too old” at the age of ten. When writing the facsimile *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*, Carroll reduced her age back to seven to recapture her at her most inquisitive.

Another reason many child-friendships ended as the child in question grew older was because, once girls had reached the age of fourteen, they were no longer considered children according to the social customs of Victorian England (Cohen xiv). When a girl turned fourteen, she suddenly became sexualized and any preexisting friendships she had with men outside the
family could not be continued for fear the impropriety of such a relationship would generate enough gossip to cause a scandal. Such an eventuality would have harmed the girl’s suitability for marriage and Carroll’s reputation as a respectable male citizen, trustworthy to invite into the family circle. Carroll had occasion to become quite familiar with this maxim, if he had not already been, in 1880. He offered watched the children of one of his colleagues from Christ Church and, when their father came to collect them, he kissed the daughter goodbye. Had she been under the age of fourteen, “and therefore ‘kissable’ by Victorian standards of good conduct,” as Carroll had believed, his action would have been completely acceptable (Cohen xiv). However, the daughter was already seventeen, and Carroll’s misjudgment was a horrifying social faux pas. By kissing a girl who had already crossed the threshold of sexuality, Carroll permanently ruined his relationship with his colleague and risked tarnishing his reputation forever because he did not express as much contrition over his mistake as he should have. When discussing the incident in his diary, he concluded by saying that he “wrote a mock apology to Mrs. Owen, assuring her that the incident [had] been ‘as distressing to her daughter as it was to [himself]’” (Carroll, Diaries 385). However, her family predictably took the incident very seriously and took “care it [did] not recur” by preventing Carroll from interacting with their daughter again (Carroll, Diaries 385).

As girls crossed the threshold from child to adult, becoming sexualized beings in the process, husbands began to appear on the scene. When Carroll had kissed the daughter of his colleague, he had merely been acting as though she were one of his many child-friends, many of whom he kissed to express friendship and fatherly affection. Even if some of his older child-friends did not take exception to being kissed after the age of fourteen, accepting the gesture as a sign of paternal affection, Carroll felt compelled to cease the practice when his child-friends got
engaged as, he wearily noted, “they are always doing” (Carroll, *Diaries* 527). With the end of the kisses and easy affection often came the end of the friendship, as his relationships with Mary MacDonald and Isa Bowman attest. The last letter that Carroll wrote to Mary was in 1874, to congratulate her on her recent engagement. In the letter, Carroll tells Mary “they say that, when people marry, they generally find it best to drop all their former friends, and begin again with a new set” (Carroll, *Letters* 214). He hopes that their very long acquaintance will endure despite that tradition and “continue for a dozen (or more) years to come” (Carroll, *Letters* 214). However, Carroll’s optimism proves to be unfounded, as this letter was the last of their correspondence. As one of Carroll’s earliest child-friends, Mary most likely influenced Carroll’s perspective on husbands early on, teaching him that marriage ended childhood, and the friendships made during that time, for good.

The loss of Mary’s friendship, and of other child-friends in similar situations, may explain Carroll’s reaction when he learned about Isa Bowman’s engagement in 1895. Although this communication occurred in person, like the majority of their friendship, Isa “recalls that for a moment he seemed quite upset, and showed his annoyance by snatching a little bouquet of roses from her belt and flinging them out of the window, exclaiming: ‘You know I can’t stand flowers’” (Carroll, *Diaries* 518). Carroll’s childish display of temper, so unlike the light-hearted, half-joking tone that pervades the majority of his written communication with his child-friends, betrays a stress that Carroll was perhaps too wise to put on paper. The violence of the reaction, comparative to his normal behavior, conveys his genuine distress and anguish at the marriage of another child-friend, and what he fears to be the end of what appears to have been one of his closest friendships.
Ultimately, the reasons that Carroll lost his child-friends, one after another and almost faster than he could make them, were unimportant when compared with the fact that he kept losing them to begin with. Often in his letters, he discouraged his child-friends from growing up, warning them that they would only be disappointed by the responsibilities of adult life. The tone of these conversations was generally light and teasing, at least on the surface. Carroll’s italics emphasize the smallest details of ridiculous statements, like when he told Gertrude Chataway that she should not “grow a bit older…if anything, [she’d] better grow a little younger,” the implied joke being that the whole statement is ridiculous to begin with (Carroll, Letters 238). He used the same trick in a letter to Agnes Argles in 1868. He told her that, unfortunately, “some children have a most disagreeable way of getting grown-up,” and he hoped that Agnes would not be doing anything so disappointing as that before he met her again (Carroll, Letters 117).

Although the italics give Carroll’s letters a distinctly nonsensical tone, they rely on a heavy disapproval of growing up, implying that the recipient should have control over this physical process, which she obviously could not. The italics do not mock those universal assumptions, they accept them as fact. The only joke they imply is based on Carroll’s own disbelief that his child-friends would refrain from growing older.

Carroll’s use of italics behaves as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it helps his letters appear appropriately nonsensical and teasing. On the other, it reveals tones of melancholy and loneliness that lie under the surface. When considered in conjunction with the ultimate fate of many of his child-friendships, this tone reveals his worry about the forces that tore his friends away from him and his emotional state once their lack of affection for him had been made clear. One way he prepared against such an eventuality was to keep letters that convincingly described the child’s attachment to Carroll “for years and years—till [the child is] old and formal....and
[gives him] a cold little bow when [they] meet” (Carroll, *Letters* 358). Intentionally keeping these letters betrayed both Carroll’s assumption that all child-friends would eventually forget him and his unwillingness to do the same in return. Carroll recorded another anecdote of the same type in his diary in 1879. He dreamt about one of his child-friends, an actress named Polly, who had grown-up some time ago. In the dream, he picked up the child Polly to take her to the theater to watch the adult Polly in one of her performances. Carroll’s astonishment over interacting with the same girl “at two different periods of life” indicated how Carroll viewed his friendship with the child Polly as completely separate from his acquaintance with the adult Polly (Carroll, *Diaries* 379). Although he had known Polly as a little girl, growing up had made her a completely different person and he continued to cling to the idea that she was a child, even when she was too old to accompany him on outings any longer.

As his child-friends grew older, many of them ceased not only to be children, but also to be Carroll’s friend. The duel loss affected Carroll deeply, leaving him without some of his closest companions and without the joy that he gained from the company of children. Playing with children, stimulating their minds and watching them discover the world around them “was like an actual material tonic to his whole system” (Bowman 59). He believed that a child’s admiration needed to be earned and for that reason the love and admiration of a little girl was a great reward as sinless as humanly possible (Woolf 119). Armed with the puzzles, riddles and games that Carroll loved so much himself, Carroll delighted children with mind tricks and logical conundrums, and the these common interests fostered an ease of communication between Carroll and his young friends that did not exist in other areas of his life. Having friends who delighted in games and readily accepted “anything new or strange” inspired Carroll to continue thinking and creating (Hatch 115). However, as the children grew older, the interest they paid to
such pastimes diminished, as did the joy they brought to Carroll’s life. To compensate for the loss, he frequently needed to replace old, close friendships with more acquaintances and hope the fledgling relationships would blossom into true friendship. But no matter how much he enjoyed seeing a little girl react to his puzzles and games for the time, at first wary but “finally [giving] herself wholly up the enchantment of his stories,” these small moments always paled in comparison to the comfortable company that his child-friends gave him (Carroll, *Diaries* 457).

Carroll feared that losing his young friends would remove one of the main sources of joy from his life forever. To prevent such a tragedy from occurring, he designed a few ways to remain a socially acceptable friend for little girls even when they were not so little anymore. The first major technique he utilized to accomplish this was by taking his own advice. As the Duchess told Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, he would “never imagine [himself] not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what [he was] or might have been was not otherwise than what [he] had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise” (Carroll 80). In other words, he contrived to be socially accepted as something different than the middle-aged man that he was.

To accomplish this, he turned once-restraining Victorian social customs and his middle-age appearance to his advantage by glossing over his age to his child-friends and their families. Often, he would exaggerate his age, pushing it over the limit of sexuality, and making him, at least according to society, too old to be interested in the flesh (Cohen xiv). By not representing a sexual threat, Carroll could interact with girls even after they had reached the age of fourteen without incurring social acrimony. Being viewed as an older man extended the length of Carroll’s friendships with individual child-friends and occasionally even deepened the amount of affection that he felt toward a child-friend. Isa Bowman was one child-friend who continued to
have a close friendship with Carroll long after she had turned fourteen, visiting him at his summer home between the ages of 12 and 16 because, as he explained in a letter to Luisa Dingley at “nearly 60, [he] ventured to do very unconventional things” (Carroll, *Letters* 862-3). Even those friendships carried out mainly through letters were lengthened in this manner. When Carroll’s correspondents turned fourteen and reduced the amount of affection they displayed toward Carroll in their salutations from “yours affectionately” to “yours very sincerely,” Carroll begged to continue expressing the strength of his affection “on the score of being about 35 years [their] senior” (Carroll, *Letters* 863). Unfortunately, Carroll’s theoretical adjustments to his age did not stop his child-friends from getting any older or, as their salutations indicate, from wishing to be on less familiar terms with him. They still often lost interest in Carroll’s games, got married and became adults with lives he could not participate in. Besides, many parents were still unwilling to risk the reputations of their daughter, no matter what the age of her older male friend.

Another tactic, similar in essence but very different in appearance, was Carroll’s tendency to appear younger than his actual age. For obvious reasons, this method only worked when he was not physically present and only existed in the minds his audience as a voice on the page. In the introductory poem to *Through the Looking-Glass*, for example, both the narrator and the subject of the poem, Alice, “are but older children” who fear the approach of bedtime (Carroll, *Alice* 117). Both the plural subject and the reference to bedtime tie the narrator, clearly Carroll himself, to Alice, indicating that, despite all appearances, they are the same age and sharing the special experience of childhood. Additionally, in the letters that he wrote to many of his child-friends, Carroll would occasionally adopt a new persona, closer in age and of the same gender of his recipient. In several letters written toward the end of 1867, for example, Carroll
signed his correspondence to his child-friends with the name “Sylvie,” a young fairy who was one of the title characters in his work *Sylvie and Bruno*. In one of these letters, written to Agnes Argles, Carroll references himself in the third person, using Sylvie’s voice to observe his behavior from ‘the outside,’ as a member of his society would have. From Sylvie’s perspective, Carroll behaves very rudely, first asking Agnes’ age, and then attempting to send her his love. Carroll has the Sylvie persona deflect these questions, and relate how she told him that those questions are quite “rude” (Carroll, *Letters* 109). But what appears to be a charming depiction of a nonchalant conversation is really a constructed, round-about way of circumventing social customs. Sylvie’s youthful, female voice appears less threatening to young girls and allowed Carroll to express sentiments that would otherwise have been unseemly and, perhaps, intimidating to his young correspondent.

But playfully adapting his perceived maturity level only solved the symptoms of Carroll’s problem, rather than its cause. Although he had found several ways to circumvent the Victorian social institutions surrounding age and sexuality, these solutions only worked in certain situations and for limited lengths of time. The only cure to the problem, of course, would be if little girls refrained from growing up altogether. If age was the end of many friendships, Carroll became the injured party, shunned through no fault of his own. After all, his interests were unwaveringly steady, as was his kind treatment of his child-friends. It was the girls who ended the friendships, injuring a blameless Carroll in the process. Hurt, he condemned the little girls for ending their friendship, casting them as the culprits and choosing age as their weapon of choice.

Published in 1865, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* captures the height of Carroll’s passive-aggression toward his aging child-friends. Carroll subjects Alice to the full force of
such anger, putting her through physical trials that cause her to question her identity and her sense of self-worth. He punishes Alice for having the audacity to grow and, for that reason, forces her to question her place in society and to suffer heavy blows to her self-esteem. In Wonderland, Alice’s trials are physical. She attempts to regulate her growth from little girl to grown-up and, with each adjustment in size, she must understand how her physical appearance affects her identity and how the other characters in Wonderland accept her. She grapples to understand how the fantastical population of Wonderland can fail to recognize her as she grows older, just as Carroll struggled to understand why so many of his child-friends rejected him after a certain age.

When Alice falls through the rabbit hole at the beginning of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, she quickly realizes that the only way to navigate through her new surroundings is by consuming size-altering food and drink. To exit the hallway of doors and enter the Eden-esque garden on the other side, Alice must shrink herself to fit through the doorway. She has a difficult time, however, finding the correct proportions of cake and liquid to consume so that she will become the right size. Trying to figure out these strange new physical laws, she accidently grows so tall that she believes her feet must have separated from the rest of her body, they are so far away. She tells them that they are “a great deal too far off [for her] to trouble herself about [them],” a direct second-person address that establishes their otherness (Carroll, Alice 16). She then spends a bit of time “planning how she would manage” to function in ordinary life with a body whose consciousness had been split into two parts (Carroll, Alice 16). This first alteration in stature called Alice’s attention to the literal effects of ‘growing up’ and illustrated that too much growing affects the way a person behaves.
After realizing that growing altered the way she acts, Alice believes that her physical appearance must also affect her identity. Confused but determined, Alice attempts to reason her way through the situation. If she was not herself, then she must be some other little girl. The first litmus test Alice concocts to test this theory relies on the assumption that knowledge defines identity. She attempts to recite “How doth the little—,” a poem she learned in her lessons but, upon opening her mouth, her voice sounded “hoarse and strange, and the words did not come the same as they used to do” when she recited the poem above ground (Carroll, *Alice* 19). When beginning to recite, Alice is not consciously aware that she has forgotten the real words, and this mental slip occurs in conjunction with a slip in her normal voice. She realizes that the words she spoke were not the “right words at all,” a self-awareness that is startling because, if she could recognize the right words, then she should have been capable of saying them (Carroll, *Alice* 19). A physical, not a mental, mistake convinces Alice that growing changes her identity. She no longer has control over her own body, let alone the people who surround her. Like Mary MacDonald, who did not retain her former acquaintances after marriage changed her name, and therefore her social identity, growing up may have caused Alice to lose her place in society.

Despite her trouble with size, Alice finally does escape the hallway and enter Wonderland proper, where she encounters a world populated by talking animals, many of whom she frightens or alienates. When she meets the Caterpillar, that pattern is reversed. He, like Alice herself, wants to know who she is, and he has no qualms about asking. His direct mode of address startles and confuses Alice just like her own mannerisms had upset many other Wonderland denizens. Quickly rallying her spirits, she asserts that she no longer needs to take responsibility for her own actions because, simply put, she is not herself (Carroll, *Alice* 41). When the Caterpillar is not a bit mollified by this redundant explanation, Alice must admit that
she “ca’n’t put it more clearly [because]…being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing” (Carroll, *Alice* 41). Although Alice’s many changes in size have disrupted her ability to recognize herself, her growth has not changed her appearance to other characters. The Caterpillar is less than sympathetic about Alice’s distress. Like Carroll, he does not understand why growing should make Alice into a different person. When faced with this outside opinion, the reader begins to view Alice’s reactions as unreasonable. Alice’s inability to identify herself must be caused by her emotional instability, a mental state that is as undesirable in Wonderland as it is in the world above.

After the Caterpillar places doubt about Alice’s sanity into the mind the reader, the concept that changes in size affect a person’s identity troubles the reader even further. Everyone’s body exists in a state of unceasing flux, changing almost imperceptively over time. If Alice’s beliefs about size turn out to be true, then everyone’s identity must also be continually changing, and it would be impossible to monitor this growth, or to ever know the people you are closest to, let alone yourself. Even Alice, at least subconsciously, feels a great amount of unrest at this idea, and much later in the book, she finds an alternative to this uncomfortable situation. When talking with the Duchess at the Queen’s croquet game, Alice is “very much pleased [with herself for] having found out a new kind of rule” about growth (Carroll, *Alice* 78). Alice reimagines the old adage, ‘you are what you eat,’ a rule that transfers control over aging back to the individual. Although it does not apply in the real world, this rule is quite accurate for the way that Alice grows and shrinks while in Wonderland. She chooses to continue growing, inflicting confusion on herself and willingly changing her identity as Carroll imagined all willful little girls like to do.
After Alice meets with the Duchess, she is escorted to the court by the Gryphon just in time for the trial of the Knave of Hearts. Originally, she merely sits in the audience, next to the Dormouse, watching the events unfold. Unfortunately, and much to her dismay, she begins growing again, this time without having eaten anything. At first, Alice remains oblivious, only noticing when the Dormouse complains about how she steadily, and quite rudely, takes over his personal space. Shamefaced, Alice apologizes for her inability to prevent such rudeness; her body has betrayed her and begun growing of its own accord, rather than in response to something she had consumed. When she offers this reason as an explanation, the Dormouse becomes quite sulky, and accuses her of growing in a “ridiculous fashion” (Carroll, *Alice* 98). The Dormouse agrees with the Caterpillar that only Alice grows unreasonably and only she becomes unreasonably upset by growing, and this corroboration makes their opinions seem less personal, and more like the social statute it is.

Alice’s sudden growth spurt, now caused merely by nature, and not by her consumption of food, forces her to acknowledge that she does not have complete control over her own growth. Just when she had thought that “there [was] no room to grow up any more” in Wonderland, she begins to grow again (Carroll, *Alice* 33). While she sits at the trial, her body continues to willfully get large, despite the fact that, besides not being able to fit in her own seat, she also has “no right to grow” any larger in Wonderland, at least according to the Dormouse (Carroll, *Alice* 98). Indignant, Alice tells him that he too is growing because everyone cannot help but grow. The Dormouse rebuffs her, saying that his growth is allowed because it occurs at “a reasonable pace” (Carroll, *Alice* 98). Although everyone grows, only little girls grow at a rate that can cause shame. By becoming so large so fast, they impose their whims on innocent bystanders like the Dormouse and Carroll, who does not understand the people his child-friends become when they
grow older and leave him behind. Alice’s abnormal size quickly draws the attention of the King who, under the pretense of the law, attempts to banish her from Wonderland forever. Despite any logical arguments Alice places before the King about the incorrectness of his laws, the jury is left to “consider the verdict” about Alice, and determine whether or not she is unnaturally tall (Carroll, Alice 104). As expected, the Wonderland denizens find Alice guilty on charges of excessive growth.

The Queen shouts “off with her head!” but it is not until Alice questions the reality of the Queen’s servants, calling them “nothing but a pack of cards,” that Alice is forced to flee from the court from danger on her life (Carroll, Alice 108). The only refuge Alice finds is the world she had left behind at the beginning of the story, a place she had originally vowed to never return to until its inhabitants acknowledged the person who she wished to be (Carroll, Alice 19). When her body grows all by itself and the court threatens her life as a result, Alice loses the chance to know her own identity before returning home. Because of her unruly, almost unnatural, tendency to grow quickly, Alice returns prematurely to her real life, losing the refuge that Wonderland had provided. For a fleeting instant, she possessed the freedom to remain a child, and determine the identity she would assume throughout remainder of her life. The dream world is only a place for children, and growing older would forces her to leave this space forever, just as Carroll’s child-friends left his world of childish entertainment behind. Carroll, like the Queen, wishes to believe that he has the power to remove unruly, growing children from his fantastical world of entertainment and absurdity; but just as “nobody moved” when the Queen called for Alice’s head, none of Carroll’s child-friends left until they no longer knew “who care[d] for [Carroll],” because it certainly was not them (Carroll, Alice 108).
In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice once again enters a fantastical alternate reality, not to learn about growth and the physical aspects of aging but to learn how to reconcile that growth with the identity she wants for herself, and with the identity that society thinks she should assume. Throughout this later book, Carroll sympathizes more strongly with Alice than with the characters she interacts with. Alice’s identity, just like Carroll and his child-friends, either makes other characters predisposed to like her or predisposed to alienate her. Soon after arriving in Looking-Glass House, Alice decides that she would like to be a queen and receives instructions from the Red Queen about how to do so. On first setting out, Alice finds herself on a train in the midst of zany, cryptic and vaguely threatening characters. The most intimidating of them all, a large anthropomorphized Gnat, asks her whether or not she would like to lose her name, promising that, if she does, her governess would have to leave off her lessons because “there wouldn’t be any name for her to call” (Carroll, *Alice* 152). The Gnat’s proposal worries Alice, who “a little anxiously” denies him, asserting that she would really rather keep her name, lessons and all, than learn how he could take it away from her (Carroll, *Alice* 151). The most logical answer, marriage, brings Carroll’s child-friend Mary MacDonald to mind and expresses the fear that, without her name, she can no longer have any attachment to her old life, or her old identity, not even to her own governess and, least of all, to her friends.

Despite having stopped the Gnat’s advances, Alice does learn how she could have lost her name when she enters the No Name Wood and suddenly forgets her entire identity. There, she meets a Fawn with “such a soft sweet voice” and disposition that they immediately became friends despite being from different species (Carroll, *Alice* 153). Unsure of both their own identities and each other’s, “they walked together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the neck of the Fawn” in the picture of perfect harmony, despite the inherent
distrust that deer usually have toward humans, even innocent little girls (Carroll, *Alice* 154). At the edge of the forest, they suddenly remember who they are and delight in remembering their own identities (Carroll, *Alice* 155). However, as they remember who they are, they also remember why their friendship is unnatural. The innocent, young Fawn speeds away across the landscape while Alice looks after it “almost ready to cry with vexation at having lost her dear little fellow-traveler” (Carroll, *Alice* 154). Alice’s immediate sense of abandonment at having lost the miracle of a trusting friendship echoes the abandonment that Carroll himself must have felt when his young child-friends, as innocent and trusting as the Fawn, abandoned his side because they had become aware of who they were and what society expected of them. Afraid of damaging their reputations, and their dignity, they fled from Carroll’s side.

Later in Alice’s travels, Humpty Dumpty tells her how she would have been able to prevent losing such an innocent friend. If she had “asked [his] advice,” as Humpty obviously believes she should have, “[he’d] have said ‘leave off at seven’” rather than continue to grow to the age of seven-and-a-half (Carroll, *Alice* 184). Just like Alice Liddell, who had been the most charming when she was seven years of age, the fictional Alice has nothing to gain from getting older besides become less interesting and, as a consequence, losing some of her best friends, like the young Fawn. However, it appears as though Alice learned her lesson about growing while she was in Wonderland because she “never ask[s] advice” on the topic any longer (Carroll, *Alice* 184). After all, “one ca’n’t help growing older” (Carroll, *Alice* 184).

Although one cannot help growing, Humpty Dumpty offers an interesting alternative, suggesting that aging can be altered “with proper assistance” (Carroll, *Alice* 184). If they put their minds to it, Humpty asserts that two people can alter someone’s aging (Carroll, *Alice* 184). This reference alludes to Carroll’s own tendency to misrepresent his actual age so that he can
continue his friendships with his child-friends. Just as Humpty Dumpty indicates, this method only worked when his child-friend chose to play along. If they grew tired of his attentions, as his letter to Luisa Dingley implied she had, the friendship could not be maintained. Of all of his child-friends, Isa Bowman was perhaps the most successful at helping him stop the wheels of time. Not only did she exaggerate Carroll’s older age, she deliberately lowered her own age to give their friendship double clearance. In her memoirs of Carroll, Isa indicates that she was “no more than ten or eleven years old” during the height of her companionship with Carroll, a remarkable statement because, in reality, she was twelve by the time she even met him (Leach 25). With Isa lowering her age and Carroll increasing his own, the two friends could not successfully stop the passage of time, but they could effectively deny it.

Having left Humpty Dumpty and his beliefs about aging, Alice continues on her quest to become a Queen, and eventually encounters a Unicorn and a Lion. The Unicorn had never seen a little girl before and, unable to recognize what sort of species she must be, he regards her “with deepest disgust” at first (Carroll, Alice 201). When he learns she is girl child, his disgust changes to an amazement that equals Alice’s own. Each has met a “fabulous monster” from their imagination (Carroll, Alice 201). Alice’s identity does not impress the Lion, who takes to referring to her as “Monster” and giving her the menial task of cutting and serving the prize cake. When Alice proves unable to accomplish even this simple task in a timely manner, the Lion loudly exclaims about “what a time the Monster is, cutting up that cake!” hoping that his criticism will make her work more quickly (Carroll, Alice 201). Alice responds that “It’s very provoking!” and the audience is likely to agree that it would be quite provoking to be called a “monster” (Carroll, Alice 201). However, the narrator’s next aside contradicts this statement, assuring the reader that Alice “was getting quite used to being called ‘the Monster’ (Carroll,
Alice’s personal failings have begun to distress her more than society’s opinion of her, a change in attitude that makes this later Alice even more similar to the older, more eccentric Carroll.

Alice’s indifference to being called a “monster” does not make much sense in comparison to the way she previously reacted to characters calling her by names other than Alice. Indeed, throughout her adventures, she has been called “Mary Ann,” (Carroll, Alice 31), a “serpent” (Carroll, Alice 47), and a “little goose,” all of which, though incorrect, were not particularly derogatory (Carroll, Alice 177). Even “serpent,” although unpleasant, had some basis in fact at the time. Alice did, after all, eat eggs and have an elongated neck. Certainly, of all the alternate identities, “Monster,” with its connotations of terror and grotesque appearances, is not the most appealing. Yet, by the time the Lion calls her Monster, Alice seems immune to the name-calling, taking her oddity for granted. Alice, like Carroll, becomes prepared to withstand the derogatory opinions of her society, and to be thought of as something she is not, in order to maintain relationships with fantastical, awe-inspiring creatures like a Lion and a Unicorn, the Looking-Glass House equivalent of young child-friends.

When Carroll set out to write his Alice books, he was not aiming to become a best-selling author who inspired children, adults and a number of retellings and spinoffs. His characters, and the absurd situations that Alice found herself in, have become integrated into the culture, as influential in modern America as they were in Victorian England. Audiences venerate Carroll as a man who championed and promoted a child-like innocence and curiosity among the young and the old alike. However, further analysis of his work reveals that a much darker message lies underneath the surface of his most well-known works. To alleviate his own oppressed and depressed feelings about the social constructs of his time, which prevented him from carrying out
his personal relationships, Carroll subjugated his young heroine to a number of trials. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, he used Alice as a vent for his anger, subjecting her to situations that endangered her and caused her to doubt her self-worth as she grew older. Alice was merely a scapegoat for the emotions he could not express to his child-friends without damaging his position as an upstanding member of society. Even though he approaches the situation differently in *Through the Looking-Glass* and appears to relate more to Alice, he still causes her to endure the same feelings of alienation and abandonment that he suffered himself. This underlying tendency to marginalize the heroine would later become exaggerated, and may have attracted audiences even more than the charming absurdity of the story on the surface.

Carroll tried all of the methods he could possibly think of to salvage his child friendships but, no matter how creative or how desperate he was and how willing his child-friends were to help him, there was no permanent solution. Time cannot be stopped, and there is no end to aging, save death. In the end, Carroll had to hope that, if nothing else, his child-friends would remember him as fondly in their older years as Alice remembered the White Knight. He wanted to be the friend who his child-friends “could bring…back again, as if it had been only yesterday” that they had spent their carefree hours together (Carroll, *Alice* 214). Just as Carroll writes the Alice books, hoping to establish his identity as the predominant writer of fairy-tale inspired nonsense stories, his White Knight begins to wistfully sing a song he claims is own invention. Simultaneously, Alice and the reader lean back “listening in a half-dream” to the “melancholy music of the song” that they both recognize “isn’t his own invention” (Carroll, *Alice* 214). The White Knight actually sings “I give thee all, I can no more” (Carroll, *Alice* 214). Truly, neither he, nor Lewis Carroll, could (Carroll, *Alice* 214).
Cartoonland, Wonderland, Disneylandia and Disneyland: Walt Disney’s Empire of Innocence

To most people, Walt Disney’s feature-length animated cartoon Alice in Wonderland is simply another in a long line of classic Disney films, each featuring an innocent protagonist and set in a fantastic local. And while the film certainly fits into that tradition, it does so because Disney used Alice to help establish that tradition of an enveloping innocence that would be repeated through his films and theme parks for many years to come. This marketing strategy has its origins in the years after World War II, when the Disney Company found itself suddenly without a market for their most recent, hyper-patriotic work. Not only that, but they also lacked the resources they had possessed before the war, and found it difficult to revert to their pre-war prosperity. Faced with a dire need to create something that would resonate in the hearts of an American public ecstatic with victory but fearful of the imminent nuclear fallout from a Cold War with Russia, Disney hoped to bring comfort to the public and, in the process, establish himself as an essential American product. Walt Disney, in attempting to establish Disney, Inc. as a viable business, used Alice in Wonderland to establish a sanitized cultural market that guaranteed the success of his company but left Alice purposeless in a story in which she was heroine and title character.

When Walt Disney Studio was officially established in 1926, Walt Disney had already owned and operated a number of production companies, often with the help of his brother Roy. From the very beginning of his career until the post-war 1950s, much of the company’s income was determined on a project-by-project basis, meaning that they could not afford to make an ill-received film. Disney established his first cartoon studio, Laugh-O-Gram, Inc., in 1920 and produced a number of one-minute filler ads for companies in Kansas City, where Laugh-O-Gram
was based (Thomas 60). To gain more credibility as a studio, Laugh-O-Gram, comprised mainly of Walt and few colleagues, most notably the superb animator Ub Iweks, next filmed fairy tale short films designed to be aired between feature films in the theaters located in major cities, specifically New York (Thomas 61). Laugh-O-Gram films, like that of many early animating companies, chose to adapt their subject matter from canonical children’s literature because the plots were simple enough to animate, but they were still compelling stories that many audiences would enjoy (Wojcik-Andrews 56). Walt insisted that his company tweak their approach to this tradition by modernizing the stories and “sprinkling [them] with gag” humor, which was even then one of Disney’s favorite entertainment techniques (Thomas 61).

The Laugh-O-Gram fairy tales, although produced using proficient animation techniques and popular subject matter, were not successful enough to generate any significant amount of income for the company. Disney was already learning the dangers of following trends, but not innovating on them in any way, a lesson that he would influence many of his later business decisions. Laugh-O-Gram, Inc. was on the verge of bankruptcy throughout the entirety of its existence, and by 1923 Disney was no longer able to escape the pressure to pay his creditors (Gabler 72). Running short on time before he had to officially file bankruptcy, Disney and the few employees who still worked at the studio launched a last-ditch effort to save the company. Their last project was designed as a pilot for a series of cartoons dubbed Alice in Cartoonland, which Disney boasted made use of “something new and clever in cartoons” (Gabler 70). The ‘discovery’ Disney had made in animation was actually just an inversion of a fairly common technique used by cartoons in 1920s, in which cartoons would appear to leap from the page and interact with a live-action set (Miller 66). He decided it would be clever to switch the
environmental setting by placing a young girl filmed using live-action into an animated cartoon world (Thomas 80).

Disney heavily promoted his new style of animation, writing persuasive sales pitches to a number of New York distributors. Luck was with Walt, and Margaret Winkler, a prominent distributor known for her work on the popular “Felix the Cat” cartoon, became interested in the pilot, most likely because she was having business problems of her own (Gabler 79). With a promising sales prospect on the line, the pressure to complete the project, now called “Alice’s Wonderland,” and to complete it both quickly and well, increased drastically. With so little money, there would be no second chances if the film was not a success. Unfortunately, when the project was only half-finished, the funds completely died out. Desperate, Walt approached early Laugh-O-Gram investors in hopes they would want to keep the company in business, but “they had already resigned themselves to losing their money and saw no reason to throw away more” on a man clearly without any business savvy or future in animation (Thomas 66).

Without any money, Disney was forced to let all of his remaining employees go because he could not compensate them for their work. He even stopped paying rent on his apartment and moved into the Laugh-O-Gram studio, where he had already made a down payment and could live rent-free, if uncomfortably (Miller 70). Although he single-handedly continued to work on “Alice’s Wonderland” and a handful of menial projects that raised some money, any earnings he made “had to go to keeping body and soul together” (Miller 70). Later Disney would look back on that period of time as “the blackest time of [his] life,” during which he had learned what “hardship and hunger were like” (Burnes 109). Eventually, he could not stall the bankruptcy proceedings any longer. Laugh-O-Gram officially went out of business and, in the process,
Disney lost all of his assets, including “Alice’s Wonderland.” After losing his business, Disney relocated to Los Angeles.

Yet, the correspondence Disney had cultivated with Margaret Winkler remained intact, and eventually he could no longer delay in showing the new film that he had promised her. He had been reluctant to show her the film because, during Laugh-O-Grams bankruptcy case, the “Alice’s Wonderland” reel had been a disputed object and Disney had a difficult time obtaining the sample to send to Winkler (Burnes 114). However, his creditors luckily agreed to release the film to a pleased Winkler, merely for viewing purposes (Thomas 72). As a film, “Alice’s Wonderland” is really quite simple. As the name suggests, the film follows the same dramatic structure that Carroll used in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The character Alice was played by Virginia Davis, a young girl from Missouri whose parents would later bring her to Hollywood to continue her part in the series (Burnes 113). The film begins with a live-action clip, in which Alice visits a cartoon studio to see how animations are made. While in the studio, Alice watches the fantastic drawings of the animators come out of the pen and straight to life, running around the blank white pages and interacting with their environment, both on the page and off. After her long, exciting day Alice goes home and falls asleep, where she dreams about Cartoonland, an animated world populated by characters similar to those she had seen in the studio. At first, all of the anthropomorphized animals line up to welcome her, many of them carrying signs and organizing a parade to welcome her. Alice dances for the animals’ entertainment, and everyone is merry. Suddenly, the scene cuts to the Cartoonland zoo, where the lions on exhibit break from their cage to eat Alice. She runs from them, seeking refuge in a tree. The lions follow, and for several frames, the tree vibrates and word bubbles indicating battle and pain float from the tree. To the audience, the triumph of the lions seems evident, but when they finally exit, their tails are
between their legs. Victorious, Alice nonchalantly saunters from the tree, wiping her hands in good-riddance. But the lions were not through with her, and the perilous chase begins again. Eventually, Alice jumps down a ravine, and the audience is left with the image of her falling like Carroll’s Alice. At the end of the film, a short live-action clip shows Alice waking and telling her mother about her fabulous adventure (*Cartoonland*).

Winkler liked the concept of the film, and signed a contract with Disney for a twelve episode season, with the option of signing for two more should the cartoons be a success (Gabler 80). Soon after Disney began sending these cartoons to Winkler, the company had been largely taken over by her husband Charles Mintz, who would conduct business with Disney from that point on. Both Winkler and Mintz both felt that, for the most part, the humor and quality of the Alice films were subpar compared to the other cartoons being shown in New York. They frequently told him that he needed to make a more concerted effort to inject more humor into the plot or they would be forced to drop the contract. By the condescending tone Winkler used in her communications with Disney, it is clear that she “seemed to regard him not as business associate, but as a child who must be taken in hand and taught the rudiments” of the industry in which he worked (Merritt 57). Mintz went so far as to thoroughly disparage Disney’s work, telling him that “the first seven pictures were an absolute total loss” and that Winkler Productions had “not made one single dollar on any picture” that Disney had sent them (Thomas 79). He concluded the letter by assuring Disney that he “should be whole-heartedly ashamed” of himself (Thomas 79). Nevertheless, despite receiving reviews like the previous one, Disney lacked the resources to significantly improve the quality of the films, or to produce them any more quickly, and the business relationship between the two men deteriorated so far that Disney feared he would lose his contract only halfway through the twelve episodes (Miller 84).
Losing the contract with the Winkler company would have left Disney without a distributor at a time when his company, and his livelihood, once again depended on the success of every film. He, therefore, responded to Mintz’s harsh criticism both by making the changes Mintz recommended and by adding his own innovations and improvements. Disney sent his seventh film, “Alice’s Spooky Adventure,” to Mintz with a note assuring him he was “trying to comply with [his] instructions by injecting as much humor as possible” into the story (Thomas 74). In plot, “Alice’s Spooky Adventure” does not differ much from the previous short Alice films. Disney still framed Alice’s animated escapade with live-action sequences, as he had done in “Alice’s Wonderland” (“Walt Disney”). The tone of this newest short, however, differs greatly from those that he had previously produced. In the seventh Alice cartoon, Disney switched from the chase humor he had been using to the slap-stick humor that was popular in the major films that were produced during this era. Much of the audience’s amusement comes at the expense of Alice’s physical pain, social marginalization and ultimate confinement, all of which strike the viewer as funny only because of her plucky attitude (“Walt Disney”). This more malevolent tone seemed to be exactly what Winkler had been looking for in Disney’s work and, because of “Alice’s Spooky Adventure,” the relationship between film-maker and distributor improved, at least temporarily. She told Disney that she had been “waiting for just such a picture” and that she hoped he would continue to produce similar Alice films in the future (Merritt 63).

After Disney rescued the first series of Alice in Cartoonland, the Winkler company would go on to sign him for the two optional seasons in their original contract. Although the Alice comedies continued to be produced, the terms of the second and third contracts were more rigorous than those of the first. Disney was expected to create a greater quantity of films per
season and to increase the production speed of each individual work, all while the amount he was paid per film was reduced as well. Mintz’s continued displeasure with the quality and content of the films, and Disney’s growing debt created a “brooding tension” between the two men that eventually “erupted into open hostility in the fall of 1925” (Merritt 78). Even in the first season, Disney had never been able to meet his deadlines, and the stricter production terms imposed on him during the later seasons was even harder to meet without severely injuring the quality of the films. Angered by what he considered to carelessness and irresponsibility, Mintz pushed Disney to produce the *Alice* cartoons even faster, and eventually Disney ordered his team to do just that. He sped up the production of each *Alice* short until he could mail each new cartoon to Mintz a week ahead of schedule. However, he still demanded that he receive the payment promptly after Mintz received each film, as their contract stated he would. Mintz once again became incensed. He did not want to pay Disney ahead of schedule, but the Disney Corporation needed that money in order to remain in business.

Besides money, another long-standing point of contention between the two men was about the way that Disney was formatting the films. Disney wanted to forego the live-action frames around each of his animated stories. Paying the actors for these scenes was expensive, and Disney felt that the layout limited his creativity. As the head of independent company, Disney held that he retained the right to make whatever type of film he wanted, so long as those films did not violate the terms of the contract he drawn up between himself and his distributor. So long as Mintz was receiving films that depicted the adventures of live-action girl in a cartoon setting, Disney did not believe he had the right to argue about the layout of the film. Mintz believed that the most interesting and unique aspects of the films revolved around how the real
action plot to the cartoon sequence and he feared that jettisoning the live-action clips would harm the salability of the films.

What had once been an innovative, career-sustaining project had turned into a “burdensome obligation” that prevented Disney from more closely pursuing his real interest as an animator (Merritt 82). Yet, as disillusioned as Disney had become with the Alice comedies, without the contract with Winkler he would not have had as much success breaking into the animation business or have had a chance to explore the uses of alternate realities in film production. Disney would later develop the themes that he had originally explored in the Alice cartoon series. When Alice enters Cartoonland, for example, she enters a world without many rules that “always finally conforms to her desires…and in which chaos ultimately yields to control” (Gabler 88). In Cartoonland, despite the dangers that Alice frequently faces, she does not need to fear any injury in this alternative universe because, ultimately, it does not affect her physical well-being at all. At this point in his career, Disney had already begun to create “a metaphor of liberation and power” in his cartoons that offered a sense of comfort, a place where the morals are as black-and-white as the characters, and a place of harmless escape from the complicated events of the real world (Gabler 88).

Despite the many ways in which Disney develop creatively, the Alice cartoons continued to fail. Finally bowing to the many inherent problems of Alice in Cartoonland, Mintz agreed to sign Disney for a different cartoon series, Oswald the Rabbit, until their business relationship completely dissolved, taking most of Disney’s chief animators and production staff with it. Once again, Disney needed to rejuvenate his business, a goal he eventually accomplished with his Mickey Mouse cartoons, which would become the first series that brought the company an unqualified success. With Mickey and his friends, Disney had finally found a popular series that
brought revenue into the company and allowed them to expand their productions into feature-length films. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first major movie production completed by the company, pushed the resources of Disney Studios to its limit. By the end of production, teams were working around the clock in eight-hour shifts, and Disney had taken out two large loans to finance the end of the project (Gabler 266). In 1937, it all paid off, providing the Disney studio with some much-needed cash and applause from their popular audience. The staff began to draft similar films, including *Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, before the advent of World War II put a halt to all normal Disney productions. The company switched its production and began creating an endless string of rousing short propaganda films to support America’s military endeavors (Miller 192). These films were wildly popular and succeeded in connecting the Disney brand name with the iconic American image. But at the end of the war, the company suddenly lost the momentum it had been building when it found itself without a market or suitable new project. Disney decided the best course of action for maintaining the company would be to go back to the feature-length projects that had been in production several years earlier for lack of better inspiration and despite his fear that, without a new direction, the company would “go backward” and lose the public acclaim they had worked so hard to gain (Miller 192). After having expressed doubts about the project several times in the past, *Alice in Wonderland* was back in production, despite Disney’s uncertainty about how to properly address the subject matter and his earlier unhappy association with its heroine (Thomas 220).

Therefore, although it was not released until 1951, the film had been on the drawing board since the early 1930s. Besides, at that time, America was still “in the throes of the ‘Alice’ fever” that had swept the country when Alice Liddell’s toured America as part of the centennial celebration of Lewis Carroll’s birth in 1932 (Allan, Walt 211). Thus, although Disney had been
uncomfortable with how to produce this film from the beginning, his company began work on the film because its subject matter, a young children’s fairy tale, was suited to the type of film that he hoped to continue producing after *Snow White*. Additionally, in producing the film he hoped to fill the strong public demand for stories related to Lewis Carroll and simultaneously bring satisfaction to the customers and money into the company. When the story was first set aside, there had already been enough effort put into the project that discarding it in a time of financial insecurity would not have been expedient. When the studio entered the red after WWII, *Alice* and the other backlogged movies provided the “one glimmer of hope that [Disney] might…win back his audience, silence the critics and pump money back into the operation” (Gabler 459). Although there were still problems with the production of *Alice*, the post-war production was greatly influenced by the patriotic persona that the Disney company had developed. The decision to produce the film had less to do with passion, and more to do with fiscal expediency, but the company hoped that by adapting the subject matter, the movie would serve as a good source of income and would reestablish the company’s place in the hearts of the American public.

One of the major struggles that Disney had when creating *Alice in Wonderland* was in determining how similar to Carroll’s books their version of the story should be. They wanted to stay true to his story, but had a difficult time deciding how to translate Carroll’s reserved British humor and quiet social critique into the sort of film that would attract an American public facing the onset of the Cold War. Disney resisted using the situational humor that the episodic nature of the *Alice* books provided “not so much because he did not understand Carroll, but because he was afraid of Carroll, afraid of his quiet wit, his old-fashioned ‘punny’ humor, his gentle unfolding of events in a prose which matches the curious atmosphere of a dream bordering on
the edge of nightmare” (Allan, *Walt* 215). The essence of Carroll’s book was much too subtle for Disney to translate to screen, and as a result his *Alice in Wonderland* lost “the dark tranquility of Carroll” and gained, instead, “an injection of vaudeville which can only be described as frantically American” (Allan, “Disney’s” 130). Disney accomplished his goal by going “to hell with the English audiences or the people who love Carroll” and making the film “funny to an American audience” instead (Allan, *Walt* 213). By appropriating a familiar text and removing any sense of otherness from the story, Disney engineered a comfortable, safe film that offered a happy escape from the pressures of the current American political situation.

Americanizing the plot, characters and humor of *Alice in Wonderland* helped the story feel more comfortable to an audience that “seemed again to need reassurance” about the instability of the world around them (Gabler 481). After WWII, the elation of victory, the toll battle had taken on U.S. citizens and the sudden loss of forward momentum affected many people, and these conflicting emotions aroused a sense of confusion that the threat of the Cold War only exasperated. Disney hoped to fill this void with a sense of comfort and family feeling that came from a “familiar…controlled animation” style and a greater concern about customer satisfaction (Gabler 481).

To achieve this goal, Disney chose to emulate the stereotypical, safe, turn-of-the-century Americana, an ideal, patriotic image that the public could take refuge in. He began collecting small furniture models for a project he called “Disneylandia,” which would convey “traditional values” and allow him to test the public reaction to his new business concept. Disney later expanded Disneylandia, which had begun as a mere model, into the full-scale project, later known as Disneyland, that that would allow the public to envelope themselves in the peaceful, Disney atmosphere (Gabler 481). If the park was meant to provide customers with a sense of
physical comfort, the movies were designed to give the audience the same sense of security on mental and emotional levels. The new goal for each Disney project, regardless of the medium used to construct it, was to invite customers into a comforting state of mind by allowing them to experience the physical “scenes” that moved past them (Gabler 534). In this way, customers were placed in the role of the protagonist, making the bland, archetypal plots of Disney’s movies all the more effective. When viewing characters without any quirky, identifying characteristics, all audience members would be more likely to relate to the story unfolding in front of them. Like Alice, customers would enter a fantastical, whimsical world, where they could feel safe and in control of the outcome.

In order to be willing to assume the role of the protagonist, the audience had to feel secure that, no matter what hardships he or she faced, the protagonists would be able to surmount the difficulties facing them and ultimately achieve lasting happiness. To make his characters approachable people whom children would want to emulate and whom their parents would approve of idolizing, Disney emphasized his protagonists’ innocence, and beginning with Cinderella and Alice in Wonderland, this led to the development of an “ideological vehicle through which history is both rewritten and purged of its seamy side” (Giroux 46). Therefore, when producing Alice in Wonderland, any detail of the story which might potentially worry the reader was rejected and reduced so as to ensure the audience left with the greatest sense of enjoyment possible. Although just enough conflict remained to convince viewers that the story they were watching was still worthwhile, all malignant qualities were made so simple they almost act as parodies of themselves, ensuring that the audience has a difficult time actually taking them seriously. By capitalizing on the utopian, American perception of innocence, Disney hoped to reinforce the status quo belief in small-town camaraderie had been established
around the turn of the century (Zipes, “Breaking 21-2). He eliminated any detail that could be considered edgy or dangerously unfamiliar from the stories that he produced and replaced that radicalism with things both right and righteous.

On the surface, Disney’s Alice in Wonderland appears to follow the episodic structure of Carroll’s books, and each Wonderland inhabitant that Alice encounters appears to be an exact reproduction of Carroll’s work. But the additions Disney made, including the way that Alice travels from scene to scene, the ordering of her adventures and the few episodes that were completely original to the Disney film, all add up to tell a very different story. While the supporting characters might be faithful to the Carroll version, Alice is not. The changes Disney made the film, sometimes incredibly subtle ones, rob Alice of the very strong, albeit snippy and prim, personality that Carroll had bestowed on her.

The sense of the status quo, conservative culture that Disney wanted to impart to the audience is clear from the very beginning of the movie. As the camera pans over illustrations of the verdant British countryside, the voice of Alice’s sister can be heard reciting Alice’s lessons to her. The first words the sister speaks appear to be the continuation of a history lesson about early British history, when William the Conqueror first entered England. She describes a man who “had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest,” a description that both references the establishment of the French aristocracy in England and the strong belief in the power of a strong central government and British imperialism that existed during the Victorian period (Wonderland). This lesson, apparently only mentioned in passing, reassures the viewer of a sense of strident nationalism and the benefits of having allegiance to the government and pride in the origins of one’s country. By referencing such strong images at the beginning of the film, Disney may have hoped his audience would implicitly affirm a status quo culture that kept the
population safe from invasion by outside forces. A strong sense of patriotism is equivalent to a strong sense of personal safety.

Alice, however, appears to miss either the explicit or implicit lessons that her sister has to offer her, being more interested “In World of [Her] Own.” In this first of the many musical acts embedded into the film, Alice outlines the types of fantastical creatures that she would create if she were in charge of the world, and all of these images reappear during her time in Wonderland, establishing for the audience that Wonderland is, in fact, a place situated purely in Alice’s imagination and that she has complete control over the events that occur while she visits there (Wonderland). Nothing can happen to Alice that she does not choose for herself, and therefore any danger in the film is neutralized before it is even registered. In case the audience has any doubt left, the end of the scene depicts Alice leaning over the riverbank. As her song concludes, the camera pans to her reflection in the water, indicating that she has become an Other, separate from her physical self. Her finger touches the water, breaking the image in a way that mirrors the shattering of her waking consciousness as she descends into sleep. The White Rabbit solidifies where her image had disappeared, reinforcing the idea that he has come from her mind (Wonderland).

While Alice is in Wonderland, she never makes a decision of her own. She takes no control over her own destiny, and merely reacts to the fantastic characters and situations as the denizens of Wonderland indicate she should. When Alice first falls through the rabbit hole, she is determined to follow the White Rabbit, and that remains her goal throughout the entire film, although in Carroll’s version she had quickly forgotten why she entered into Wonderland in the first place. By attempting to use the Rabbit as a unifying theme throughout the work, Disney compromises Alice’s responsibility for her own travels. She simply follows where the White
Rabbit goes, and ends up in the places that he leads her to, rather in the place that she wanted to be. Even once she finds herself in Wonderland, she does not have to find the correct exit from the imprisoning hall of doors or understand the strange laws of growing and shrinking by herself. Besides there being only one exit to choose from, Alice always sees evidence of the White Rabbit’s passage, making doubly sure that she goes in the right direction (Wonderland). Once she gets to the final door, she meets its talking doorknob, who explains where the Rabbit has gone and how to alter her size using the food-stuff available to her. Disney’s Alice lacks so much self-sufficiency that, even when receiving directions, she cannot free herself from the hallway. Frustrated at her circumstances, Alice sits down to cry, never thinking about how to solve her problem at all. Instead, the talking doorknob talks her through the process of exiting the door and questions all of her actions, preventing Alice from having to exercise her own problem-solving abilities. Disney’s Alice never uses her intelligence, but lets her emotions literally sweep her away. Even after she has escaped the endless ocean of tears, Alice can never willingly free herself from her own emotions. Every time she tries to call for help or get the shore, the waves knock her over, finally washing her up on land. She is safe, but not because of anything except for luck. Even as Alice’s pro-active character is compromised, Disney promotes the wish-fulfillment philosophy that he wants the audience to associate with his company. Success does not depend on a person’s intelligence or hard work, but simply comes to anyone who visits Wonderland.

Once through the first challenge, and having found the White Rabbit once more, Alice runs into the woods, where she meets the twins Tweedledum and Tweedledee, who tell Alice the story of the Walrus and the Carpenter. Disney adapts the poem written by Carroll, retaining the same plot but changing the “eldest oyster” character to a mother oyster, thereby introducing a
maternal, protective element to the story. The mother offers advice to her children, telling them to “stay right here” rather than heed the enticements of strangers (Wonderland). When the young oysters do not listen, they are promptly eaten. By placing this instructive story at the beginning of Alice’s adventures, and by inserting the protective, motherly advice into the plot, Disney enforces the idea that people should listen to the more conservative, older generation. Advice is to be followed, especially by young girls like Alice. The poem serves as a warning, albeit an apparently unnecessary one, that Alice follows throughout the remainder of the work and which the audience may follow long after the film is over by continuing to buy into the Disney promise.

The only point at which Alice’s navigational strategy fails is when she finds herself without anyone’s directions to follow. Having reached her fill of nonsensical behavior, Alice leaves the Mad Tea Party, determined to simply retrace her steps and return home. To do this, she forgets her determination to follow the White Rabbit, a decision that finalizes her concession of self. Her interest in the White Rabbit, unfounded as it may have seemed, was still the only individual ambition that she has displayed throughout the entire story. She talks herself out of her former curiosity, demanding to know “who cares where he is going anyway,” since it certainly is not her (Wonderland). “If it hadn’t been for him,” she thinks, “I—” (Wonderland). Although she breaks off her sentence, she has already blamed the Rabbit for her current situation, a belief that finalizes her rejection of her own goal. Her ire is entirely misplaced. The only thing the White Rabbit had done to her was lead her around Wonderland, or rather, be trailed by her, as he attempted to go about the ordinary, apparently expedient business of his day. However, Alice rejects all personal responsibility for her situation, even the responsibility that would have come from her decision to follow him. Instead, she acts as though she had been dragged from place to place against her will.
Without anyone to follow, Alice does not successfully retrace her steps, but instead finds herself in the Tulgey Wood surrounded by a number of whimsical, Dali-esque creatures. Rather than being awed by these unique and quirky animals, Alice becomes depressed and desperately wishes to return home. She cannot find her way without any directions to follow, and only when the mome raths kindly point her toward a path does she blithely continue on her way, exclaiming that she “knew [she’d] find one sooner or later” (*Wonderland*). Alice accepts the responsibility for her good fortune and the kindness of others, displaying the sense of entitlement to happiness that Disney may have hoped his customers would experience while watching his movies and visiting his parks.

Momentarily on her way once more, Alice once again finds herself lost when a broom-dog sweeps the path out from under her very feet. Rather than enjoying her chance to experience a magical environment with sympathetic, if peculiar, creatures, Alice laments her situation with the melancholy song “I Give Myself Very Good Advice (But Very Seldom Follow It)” (*Wonderland*). She finally appears to notice her own passivity in a dream that is meant to be a wish-fulfillment of all her most intimate beliefs. She acknowledges the thoughtlessness with which she “went along [her] merry way and…never stopped to reason” and she believes her current despair stems from having not stopped to consider her actions (*Wonderland*). Only the fortuitous appearance of the Cheshire cat saves Alice from a complete existential crisis. He halts her song to ask her what has caused all of her unnecessary tears. She tells him that she simply wants to go back home but that she “can’t find [her] way,” a very serious lamentation that the Cheshire cat only laughs at (*Wonderland*). He tells her to stop being ridiculous—the only reason she cannot find her way “is because [she has] no way” in Wonderland (*Wonderland*). This statement appears to marginalize Alice even farther, by rejecting her presence in her own dream...
and denying her a place in her own imagination. But given the subject matter of her latest song and the depression that her own seeming ineffectualness has caused, this news actually is quite positive. It is no fault of Alice’s own that she cannot leave Wonderland. Even when it appears that she has ruined her chances of success, the laws governing Wonderland ensure that she has does not have to pay the price of her failure. Alice can face no harm, even that of self-recrimination, while she resides in the wish-fulfilling land of her imagination.

Not only Alice lacks a way in Wonderland—all of the other characters, except for the tyrannical Queen of Hearts, do too. Her Majesty towers over everyone, even her husband the King, with both her size and her imperiousness. All ways in Wonderland are the Queen’s way, a message that helps to reiterate the historical lesson that Alice was supposed to have been learning at the beginning of the film (Wonderland). Throughout the entirety of her adventures, Alice and her audience have learned the virtues of staying on the set path, listening to the given directions, and of residing in a wish-fulfilling world. By doing these things, a person never needs to worry about the state of their well-being. Unlike the oyster children, they will never face any form of death, whether literal or metaphorical. At the end of the film, however, it turns out that the path Alice, and the audience, has been following belongs to the Queen who, as the head of the government system, symbolizes the most accepted and standardized culture. By listening to an established, traditional belief system, such as that which Disney presented to its audience after 1950, the audience never will never have to fear any sort of crisis, or existential fear, again. There will always be a safe, comforting retreat where all problems are automatically and quickly dealt with, without any trouble on behalf of the victim.

*Alice in Wonderland* established a completely sensory world of innocence that Disney products would embody for a long time to come. The film has become fully integrated into
American culture, and is the version of Alice that most children are familiar with, but its popularity is not because Disney possessed some “uncanny ability to retell nineteenth-century fairy tales with originality and uniqueness” (Zipes, “Once Upon” 109). In fact, when the movie first came out, many Carroll aficionados felt that the movie fell short of accurately representing the whimsically absurd tone of the classic story. Disney did not laugh at intellectual humor, the main source of entertainment in Carroll’s novel, and so he attempted to bring the film closer to a typically American point-of-view instead. Disney Americanized the humor, using surrealistic vaudeville rather than subtle intellectual jokes, a solution which helped him strip the story of its distinctly British heritage. He described the humor as having the “tempo of a three-ring circus,” a trait that he believed would “satisfy everyone except a certain handful who can never be satisfied” (Allan, Walt 215). That handful, theoretically, was the group steadfastly dedicated to the original novels and unwilling to see them tampered with in any way. Choosing this sort of humor had two distinct repercussions on Disney’s film. For one thing, it was meant to “be funny…funny to an American audience,” rather than those who stubbornly refused to let go of the original story (Allan, Walt 213). He wanted the average American to be able to put their money into something they could laugh at and understand, something that would make them feel satisfied and cheerful when they left the theater, positive emotions they would associate with the Disney brand name and come to associate with its products. The second repercussion was that the Disney studio sacrificed much of the “warmth and cohesiveness” that had been inherent in Carroll’s book (Watts 285). The very generic qualities of Disney’s Alice prevent her character from being offensive to any particular audience, and allow her to act as a blank slate on which audience members can project themselves, but it does not make her a particularly attractive heroine in her own right.
Nevertheless, if Disney did not succeed in making a faithful fairy tale adaptation when he produced *Alice in Wonderland*, he did succeed in creating a new, fantastical and enticing genre of films meant “to glorify a particular American perspective regarding individualism” (Zipes, “Once Upon” 109). Disney built an industry geared toward the satisfaction of each customer. He aimed to emotionally captivate each viewer at a time when the public most needed this type of careful and caring personal reassurance. The way Disney ensured that this personal attention was given to each customer was by sanitizing his films and his characters, transforming them into bland backdrops on which audience members could project their own desires. Only a notion of innocence that “aggressively rewrites” the original meaning of a borrowed text could ensure that each story accomplished this goal (Giroux 45). As caring as the film appears to be to an unconcerned public, however, it hides a darker and more malicious implication. The sense of security it offers to the audience does not necessarily exist in the world around them, and wiping clean the historical slate was not for the purpose of creating better art or educating children but “for the sake of promoting the label marked Disney” (Zipes, “Once Upon” 110). The Disney Corporation acted as if misfortune can be ignored into oblivion, but by buying into the concept of safety it offered to the customer, the audience fell prey to a subtle, well-sprung trap. The “celebrated innocence of the Disney Empire” began with *Alice*, but the “infantile [and] narcissistic…underside” of the corporation appeared at the same time (Wojcik-Andrews 217).
Monsters, Masks and Moviemaking: Tim Burton Colors the Blank Canvas

To many people, a film version of *Alice in Wonderland* produced by Tim Burton seems like an obvious box office hit. Known for his quirky characters, surreal fantasy-like settings and dream motifs, Burton seems perfectly adapted to handling the subject matter of Wonderland, with its strange locals and even stranger inhabitants. But the success of the project was not as obvious to Burton, just as his reputation as one of the quirkiest producers in Hollywood has not always been certain in the eyes of the public. From the very beginning of his career, Burton has been known for his movies about monsters and outsiders, characters that are marginalized by the rest of society and toward whom he feels a large amount of sympathy. Burton’s portrayal of Alice as an internalized character in search of her identity mirrors his own struggle with the social, exterior world more faithfully than his monster motifs. The peril that Alice faces as she grows up shows the trouble that Burton has had with trying to secure his own identity in his culture.

From the beginning of his career, Burton has had a close connection to fairy tales and fantasy stories similar to *Alice*. Hired by Walt Disney Inc. from CalArts before he had completed his degree, Burton’s talent was recognized early on (Salisbury, *Burton* 8). However, the longer Burton worked at the Disney studios, the clearer it became that he was not capable of being transformed into the sort of “zombie factory” artist that he felt company preferred to work with (Salisbury, *Burton* 10). Practically synonymous with the words “fairy tale,” Disney seemed to be the perfect place for a young animator like Burton who was so interested in fairy tale motifs himself. However, as the “Hansel and Gretel” short Burton produced in 1982 illustrates, Burton’s fairy tale aesthetic was much different from the classic Disney feel. Instead of the cleanly-drawn lines, large-eyed innocent characters and minimal gore that defines Disney’s
traditional work, Burton’s short retells the story with images of a house that “deliquesces like melted ice cream,” “demonic gingerbread men” and “Technicolor blood” (Cashdan). Disney had no room for Burton’s dreamlike, live-action films whose main success was in offering “twisted, perverted fun” rather than the family-fun the company promotes (Cashdan).

Burton’s connections to fairy tales and film have their roots in his own childhood and have since influenced both his career as a trend-setting artist and his concept of childhood. From what he has mentioned about his youth, it appears not to have been traditionally abusive. However, his relationship with his parents was never particularly good, a circumstance he believes “had to do more with the fact that when [he] was living there, [he] felt old for his age” than with anything else (Salisbury, Burton 204). He did not get along well with his mother, his dad traveled frequently and, like many parents, “they were having whatever their problems were” the majority of the time (Salisbury, Burton 204). Although Burton does not seem to be hiding any unmentionably terrible skeletons in the closet, his relationship with his parents was full of enough miscommunication and misunderstanding to help solidify Burton’s belief that he was an outsider.

One story Burton tells to quantify the effects his parents had on him occurred before he moved in with his grandmother at the age of ten and may have contributed to this reason for leaving (Salisbury, Burton 204). For reasons unknown to him at the time, his parents decided to wall in his large, normally-sized windows and replace them with a small slit high up on the wall (Page 9). Later, he would find out that their reasoning had been based on “a suburban thing of keeping the heat in or something,” that theoretically would have made young Burton more comfortable (McKenna 166). For a little boy already convinced he was different than the rest of the world, however, blocking those windows seemed like a horrible act of tyranny. Burton could
no longer look out and observe the trend of daily life from his most personal space. Disgruntled, he turned his attention inward even more, developing in a way that made him feel even more distant from the organized world of suburbia. In addition, blocking the windows prevented, at least theoretically, the rest of the world from looking back at Burton. Unaware of his presence, no one could reach out and help to assimilate him into the larger culture.

Perhaps that, more than anything else, was the sticking point for a young Burton. He felt as though no one wanted to contact him at all, not metaphorically or even literally. His parents were very reserved, not believing in frequently showing the type of physical affection commonly found in other families (McKenna 167). The lack of interpersonal communication during his childhood permanently affected his perception of his suburban surroundings and, to this day, he traces many of his problems back to the blank slate of the suburbia. The lack of interpersonal communication that he found in that landscape and the lack of alternative lifestyles available for retreat influenced his negative perception of that environment. Burton describes his childhood in terms not of what he could, but of what he could not do. Although his “parents weren’t particularly strict,” they did not need to be to increase Burton’s sense of claustrophobia and entrapment, feelings that he believes arose from the surrounding suburban landscape (McKenna 166). Typically, suburbia is considered the epitome of normal, a societal median, situated between the city and the country, a place without extremes that is ideal for raising children. But to Burton, extremes are not the only thing lacking from such a background. In suburbia, he says, there is also “no sense of history, no sense of culture, no sense of passion for anything…no attachment to things” (Salisbury, Burton 91). Even “the weather’s always the same,” creating a blank slate of events, a steady monotone not meant to create memories (Cashdan). He struggled
every day, and still does, against the voice of someone telling him that his most recent idea “doesn’t make any sense” because in Burbank, they did not (Salisbury, Burton 7).

For Burton, there were several different, though not necessarily separate, solutions to the problems he faced in suburbia. The first obvious option, and one which Burton could not abide by, was to “conform and cut out a large portion of your personality,” becoming as blank and monotone as the suburban environment, as uniformly pleasant as the weather of southern California (Salisbury, Burton 91). The second possibility, almost the polar-opposite of the first, was to “go inside [yourself] and explore [your] own artistic thing” (Cashdan). Choosing this option, somehow finding inspiration within an empty void and externalizing that interior vision by splattering creatures from your own imagination onto the empty canvas of the world around you, was both a “way to resolve things, a form of therapy” (Salisbury, Burton 243) and an impetus to develop a “very strong interior life which made you feel separate” (Salisbury, Burton 91). Burton believed that using art as an outlet for his pent-up frustrations saved him from becoming uninteresting or from losing his sense of self, but it also exasperated the feelings of loneliness and alienation that he felt while living in Burbank.

For inspiration in his artwork, Burton looked to horror films, a genre that had helped him explore the world outside of his claustrophobic suburban community. More attracted to the many B-films that were being shown as triple-features in his local cinemas or on the TV during weekend afternoons than to any mainstream sensations, Burton often found more acceptance through watching gory movies than by interacting with the people around him. Not particularly attached to people, Burton learned that “there’s enough weird movies out there so you can go a long time without friends and see something new every day that kind of speaks to you” (Salisbury, Burton 2). He especially loved to watch movies like The Brian That Wouldn’t Die
when they were broadcast on the television, because then “there’s a weird energy they give off. Maybe it’s because you know other people are watching it at the same time, so it becomes this odd kind of shared experience” (McKenna 173). These movies provided him with a sense of community lacking in his daily life, a belief that he shared company with other people watching these films and with the monsters that the films depicted. He felt that “most monsters were basically misperceived,” like himself, and that they “had much more heartfelt souls than the human characters around them” (Salisbury, Burton 3). As Burton has gotten older, his love for these films has not diminished. Growing up in the age of the television meant that he never felt inspired to read and, as a result, his “fairy tales were probably those monster movies” (Salisbury, Burton 3). Those movies helped Burton develop his personal mythology. He internalized “the poetry of [those movies],” the mostly imagined torment of the characters (Salisbury, Burton 5), and the images “so heavy that they stayed with you and...became the story” (Tirard 95). The imagery and feeling of community that Burton absorbed through watching these films remains with him to this day. In those old horror films, “even when [the monsters] die, they don’t die…they are always coming back…always fighting” and, in Burton’s mind, even when he believes he has forgotten the old stories, they keep coming back and fighting for his attention (Breskin 56).

Many of the recurring themes that appear in Burton’s oeuvre are rooted in the emotions that Burton experienced as a child. Burton believes that all people are “a product of [their] upbringing” (Boucher) and, therefore, all people “spend [their] lives, consciously or not, rehashing the same idea over and over again” in an attempt to come to terms with their early life and with the problems that they faced while growing up (Tirard 100). Even at the age of 51, Burton is still frequently described as a “happy-to-be-left-alone teenager at heart” who has a
number of unresolved issues of his own (Cashdan). Just as he had done as a child, Burton
continually turns to his artistic imagination to exorcise this angst. He refers to movie-making as
“an expensive form of therapy” that, despite the price, is only so effective (Fussman). Even as a
child, Burton was aware that using his creativity as an outlet could be a double-edged sword.
Being an artist forced him into an interior landscape, further alienating him from normal social
interactions and justifying his belief that he was not accepted by others. As an adult, his attempt
to remove these issues from his subconscious merely results in the same themes recurring
throughout the body of his work. This repetition of material borders on an obsession. That
knowledge bothers Burton because he does not feel as if he is “evolving” into a better person or a
more mature adult (Boucher). No matter how many times he addresses the same material, he can
never be sure that he has “exorcised” the subject matter from his subconscious (Breskin 71).
Burton feels as his emotional problems never actually leave. They simply “move along a little
bit,” perhaps take on a slightly different feel, but ultimately remain the same (Breskin 71). He
describes this recurrence as “a curse [he] is desperately trying to break” (Tirard 100) but
recognizes that, without that impetus driving his creativity, his adult life would not as meaningful
(McKenna 175).

The themes that float around Burton’s mind resemble the fairy tale motifs that are
 ingrained into American culture, because they continually surface in new work and in different
ways. After Burton left Disney in the mid-1980s, he continued his work with fairy tales and with
films that may not have been specifically designed for children, but which still appeal to a
younger audience. For Burton, fairy tales are an important cultural foundation. They tell
universal stories but remain open to interpretation by modern audiences. Fairy tales teach the
viewer about “seeing things and just having your own idea about them,” which helps stimulate
creativity and encourages the development of a unique voice (Salisbury, Burton 3). The archetypal motifs found in fairy tales can be expanded and applied to the events in anyone’s life. One that Burton frequently makes use of in his own work is the child motif, which represents the “birth of the personality” and the very beginning of the “individualization process” on a cultural level (Basil-Morozow 34). Burton believes that the child-abandonment motif present in so much literature can explain why “each artist… is now isolated and fighting on his own” to create something that will influence the audience to break through the blindfold that the cultural majority pulls over the eyes of the consumer (Basil-Morozow 41). It was not “fairy tales specifically” that influenced Burton’s own use of fantastical and surreal elements in his work but “the idea of them” as a medium of retelling, as a framework for stretching his own canvas (Salisbury, Burton 3).

Burton’s own childhood may have influenced how he views children as an audience for his work because his beliefs about children as consumers appear to run counter to the modern perception of childhood. In modern America, children are no longer viewed as producers for the family, but as consumers who are “economically ‘worthless’ [but] emotionally ‘priceless’” (Montgomery 67). They are no longer expected to work or to provide any significant contributions, besides happiness, to the household. By reducing the contributions children are expected to make to the household, parents hope to shelter them from stressful situations and the emotional harm that accompanies it, thereby prolonging their innocence. As a result, the concept of adolescence arose as a “Western construction” for describing the time when all of the information that had previously been withheld has “an overwhelming impact on the growing child” (Montgomery 202). During adolescence, children begin to be exposed to the worldly ills that they had once been protected from, and this influx of information, coupled with the need to
form their own identities, makes adolescence a time of “extreme behavior and stress for both the individual and the society” (Montgomery 202). The depression, dark attitudes and hyper-emotional tendencies that make adolescence so difficult to deal with springs directly from a reaction to the innocence parents impose on their children.

Contrary to these mainstream opinions, Burton believes that children are not as incredibly fragile as society tends to make them out to be. “Adults,” he says, “tend to overlook the fact that children are supremely intelligent in a unique way” (McKenna 173-4). Children, he believes, are simple because they have not yet been perverted by society. In that simplicity, there is “a certain amount of strength…a certain amount of passion… [and] a clarity” that allows them to cope with stressful subject matter much more easily than adults believe they can (Breskin 65). The world as children see it, Burton says, is a world “not all delights and adventure, but sinister” as well (Caldwell 7). The difference between children and adults, however, is that children still possess clear, unclouded instincts that help them separate good from evil on their own. As a result, the sinister, the terrifying and the monstrous do not scare them. Burton believes this is because “every kid identifies with the monster” more strongly than he identifies with the hero. Monsters, like children, have a strong sense of otherness about them (Breskin 48). Both enter unknown worlds and must assimilate to the strange rules and unspoken customs they find there.

Many parents do not grasp the innate sense of kinship between children and monsters, instead imposing their own beliefs over the vision of their children in an attempt to protect them from the evils of the world. However, Burton believes that children do not develop any emotional complexes until the adult attempts to protect them from this exposure. To him, “it’s [adults] that have got the problem. [They] impose fears on…kids [who] are actually quite robust” and innately able to cope with heavy subject matter” (McCabe). Instead of attempting to
influence children with their own beliefs, adults should be learning how to retain the clarity of vision that children display, since that is the only thing that will help them “punch through” the “cultural framework, which gets beaten into [children]” as they grow older (Breskin 44). Only a child will able to really “connect [an adult] to that time when everything is new” and the monster under the bed was really your friend (Fussman).

The monster motifs and feelings of alienation that pervaded Burton’s childhood reappear throughout his work, normally in the form of a slightly off-beat and monster-like protagonists. These characters, like Burton, “demand the right to be different” from the people who surround them (Basil-Morozow 46). They are “shunned by an ignorant and cruel world who won’t look past the surface of the ‘freak’ to see the gentle soul residing inside” of the off-putting exterior (Caldwall 8). Edward Scissorhands, for example, focuses on an almost-man created by a scientist living in a mansion high above suburbia. Unfortunately, the old scientist died before he had the chance to replace the large knife blades at the end of Edward’s arms with real hands. Left alone, Edward is eventually discovered by the Avon lady and brought into an artificial, cookie-cutter suburban neighborhood, where he attempts to use his unique physical build to benefit the community. For a time, he gains a qualified acceptance. Predictably, however, Edward accidently slices one of the community members with his scissorhands, an incident that turns the neighborhood against him. His body betrayed his good intentions, and the inability to touch the community, to connect without harming it, forced him to return to solitude (Edward). Often considered the most autobiographic of Burton’s characters, Edward symbolizes Burton’s expressed inability to enter a regular society and to be considered normal.

While Burton does feel a connection with Edward, he is not the only one of his creations that Burton relates to. He has “always felt close to all the characters” in all of his films, in one
way or another. Each is “symbolic of something inside” of himself and, perhaps that connection led Burton to produce *Alice in Wonderland* (Salisbury, *Burton* 44). On the surface, the film seems to invert the paradigm followed by many of Burton’s other stories, including *Edward Scissorhands*. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the main character is not a monster—she is a normal girl, living in a normal society, who falls into a fantastic world. She presents herself as shy and retiring, and performs the motions of the societal dance, as she does with here fiancé-to-be, Hamish, in the opening scene, with minimal outward fuss. However, she rebels in small ways society will not easily detect. These small disobediences help her to cope with the pressures that society places on her by giving her an illusion of control over her situation. This secret rebellion, and Alice’s transition from her daily landscape into a surreal landscape, indicates that she might not be that different than Edward Scissorhands and that she, too, is “symbolic of something inside” Burton (Salisbury, *Burton* 44).

When he was deciding whether or not to produce *Alice in Wonderland*, Burton considered the plethora of other adaptations that had already been made. Ultimately, he concluded that the “very abundance and familiarity of the material ‘in the subconscious and in the culture’ was an incentive—not a deterrent—to take it on” (Rohter). It was material that he, like most other modern Americans, had grown-up somehow knowing, whether they were familiar with the actual text or not. Burton feels a strong connection to that material which, just like fairy tales and monster movies, has a great impact on adult lives. Coupled with his belief that there had “never been a version [of the story] that particularly works,” *Alice* seemed perfectly suited to Burton and his aesthetic (Rohter). There is something about “working with something that’s meant a lot to you” that continually draws Burton to the same subject matter and inspires him to address it from different angles (Boucher). In *Alice* there is only “a very thin
film between sanity and insanity and total wildness and chaos and fear” that Burton hoped to emphasize (McCabe). Although this intense subject matter might seem misplaced in a children’s story, at least to the sanitized opinions of today’s viewing audience, Burton believes that the thin borders between truth and reality are really “the most true expression of what it’s like to be a child” who can clearly see the magic of the world around him (McCabe).

Many of these concepts about childhood and reality appear in Alice in Wonderland even before Alice dives into Wonderland. At the beginning of the movie, she goes with her mother to attend a garden party that, unbeknownst to her, was also meant to be her engagement party. While there, Alice is forced to perform a very awkward quadrille with Hamish, her fiancé-to-be, for the sake of social politeness. Even from this short scene, it is obvious that Alice has never fit well into the social constraints of Victorian England. In stereotypical teenage fashion, she flouts those customs she thinks she can escape without repercussions. She refuses to wear her stockings or pay close attention to the strict dance steps, instead amusing herself with her imagination and almost-flighty curiosity. Her rebellions are small enough that she can at least appear to fit in society, despite “experiencing what many teenagers are experiencing…a discomfort in [her] skin and, in [her] society…a feeling of isolation,” and significant enough that she can believe she has not lost control over her situation (Goodwin). Only after she learns of her impending engagement does she seem to fully awake and engage with the world around her. Stuck in a society that she does not fit into, she suddenly must confront what exactly that society expects of her, which is to marry and be a good, quiet wife to the man of her parents’ choosing. Scared, Alice begins paying more attention to her surroundings, and the imperfections that she had been avoiding come into focus. She understands the madness of her spinster aunt Imogen, left with nothing to occupy her mind but her own failings. She discovers the philandering nature of her
brother-in-law Lowell, whose amoral actions illustrate how unattractive her impending marriage really is. Added to Hamish’s dull, straight-laced character and his mother’s predatory tendencies, marriage begins to look even less attractive to Alice. Only then does she notice the White Rabbit, not out of boredom as in earlier versions but because of a newfound hyper-awareness of her surroundings. Mid-proposal, she pulls a blue caterpillar from Hamish’s shoulder and, just when she must make a decision, the ticking of a clock becomes audible, an insistent noise pressuring her to hurry, hurry. This time Alice, not the White Rabbit, is late.

At that moment, Alice knows what she must do. She knows that she has to “put a pin in this crucial decision and follow the rabbit, because that was her destiny” (Salisbury, “Tim Burton”). She falls down the rabbit hole and immediately finds herself in a hallway of doors, unable to exit until she learns how to work Underland’s physical laws of growing and of shrinking. Leaving the room becomes a puzzle to be solved using her intellect, not her emotions, a change in reasoning that emphasizes Alice’s maturity. Suddenly, voices float over the screen, narrating Alice’s struggles, and arguing over her identity. The Dormouse adamantly asserts that this Alice is “the wrong Alice” because she cannot remember how to get the key and enter into the garden (Alice). The audience gleans from the conversation that Alice had been to Underland before, and this time its inhabitants are waiting for her. Her presence in Underland has become crucial, not incidental as it was in previous stories, to the inhabitants. However, the Dormouse’s judgment about her memory is not completely true. On her first visit to Underland, which Burton implies is a conflation of all the previous retellings, Alice never did figure out how to make her body the proper size to exit while simultaneously remembering to grab the key needed to unlock the little door. Disney’s Alice, for example, and sat down and cried, her tears forming a river that swept her through the keyhole. This older Alice lives “inside or underneath the iconic
Alice,” sharing the same worries and the same fears, but dealing with them in a very different way (Goodwin).

Having finally solved the riddle, Alice steps into the vibrant and colorful Underland garden. When creating Underland, Burton stuck very closely to Carroll’s detached tone, depicting a world that is frightening but not horrible (Le Blanc 8). It is a world that pushes Alice’s boundaries, forces her to acknowledge some of her deepest psychological problems, and that even offers the reality of physical violence, but it is not a world to hide from. Underland does not threaten her existence. It just pushes her to understand herself and what she wants from life. Alice’s plunge into Underland mirrors Burton’s own immersion in the movie business, and in his artwork. In Underland, “a lot of deep psychological fears [about] inadequacies… insecurities and [relationships] with the world” float to the surface where the surreal setting means they can be dealt with safely (Mouroux). When Alice first falls into Underland, she finds that it is “kind of representative in some surreal way of issues that she is dealing with in her own life” and, in turn, of all the issues Burton deals with in his (“Finding Alice”).

To help solve the debate about whether or not Alice is actually who the Underland inhabitants were looking for, they take her to Absalom, a wise, hookah-smoking caterpillar, whom Alice had seen right before falling down the rabbit hole. Many of the quintessential Wonderland characters, including the White Rabbit, the Tweedles and the Dormouse, complain that she cannot be the right Alice because she does not remember them. Unlike in Carroll’s story, where Alice begins to question her own identity, this Alice is sure of who she is. She declares that she cannot be the wrong Alice because this adventure belongs in her dream and, anyway, she “ought to know” who she is (Alice). Absalom, however, twists her words. He agrees that she should know who she is, but assumes she does not, calling her a “stupid girl”
(Alice). Slowly, the disbelief of the Underland inhabitants wears away Alice’s resistance and causes her to question her own identity as well. Almost immediately after she defends herself, she changes her mind and apologizes for being the “wrong Alice,” a self-identification that continues until her next conversation with Absalom at the end of the movie (Alice). Then, their roles switch. He does not need to question her identity because she automatically introduces herself as “Alice, but not that one” (Alice). Absalom questions her again, this time indicating that she might be the ‘right Alice’ after all. When they first spoke, he said she was “not hardly Alice,” not ‘not Alice’ (Alice). Commonly, people believe the phrases ‘not hardly’ and ‘hardly’ are interchangeable, both meaning ‘barely’ or ‘not quite.’ However, logically, the phrase actually implies that she is ‘not not quite’ Alice, or ‘quite Alice,’ implying that Absalom has been sure of her identity all along. Alice, like Burton, struggles to retain her identity despite pressure from society that causes her to question that certainty.

The Alice who visits Underland, unlike the Alice who went to Wonderland, has no question about who she is. She knows that she is Alice, and interestingly, her defense of her identity always coincides with a declaration that she controls her own dreams. Part of Burton’s purpose in the creation of Wonderland was “to explore the nature of dreams,” both those that occur while we are sleeping and those which influence a person’s actions in the real world (“Finding Alice”). To Burton, the hallucinatory dream of Underland mimics Alice’s life in the real world, and her search for identity in this unknown world will clarify her search for identity above ground. Just as Burton found his own identity and established his own ideas about reality under the refuge that artistic alternatives offered him, Alice discovers her identity by taking refuge in an alternate reality.
Although dreaming is considered a more hallucinogenic, and therefore less real, state of consciousness that cannot be trusted, Alice holds onto her conviction that her newest adventure is only a dream and uses that knowledge to help her navigate through Underland. Despite all of the debate about whether or not she is the ‘right Alice,’ the heroine of the film refuses to cease being the heroine of her own dream. She gets tired of being “told what [she] must do and who [she] must be” and of being “shrunk, stretched, scratched and stuffed into a teapot” (Alice). She does not care what Alice she is, because “this is [her] dream… [she] makes the path” whether she the other characters consider her qualified or not (Alice). Bayard, a loyal dog and subject of the White Queen, listens to this rant with some trepidation but nevertheless follows Alice’s decision and takes her to rescue the Mad Hatter from the clutches of the Red Queen. Later, he reports these actions to the White Queen, guilty that he had given into Alice’s logic and “allowed her to diverge from her destined path” (Alice). But the choices that Alice makes independently, without the influence of others, correspond to the path she should have been following in the first place. By following her own path and listening to herself, rather than to the society around her, Alice has proven she is the ‘right Alice,’ and therefore the long-sought champion, after all. Without knowing it, she validated Absalom’s hypothesis and honored Bayard’s subconscious faith in her decisions.

Burton’s goal in producing the film appears to have been to determine the nature of dreams, and to establish how they function compared to reality. In her conversation with Bayard, and when she had originally faced the Bandersnatch at the beginning of the movie, Alice draws strength from her knowledge that she dreams not only because that puts her in control of the situation, but because her actions in Underland would not impact reality. The anxiety of making an incorrect choice has been lifted from her shoulders because she does not believe that
her adventure will have repercussions on her future. The problem Alice finds when she goes to rescue the Mad Hatter, however, is that the people she meets in Underland still evoke very real emotions within her. The platonic affection that develops between Alice and the Hatter has its basis in a feeling of mutual understanding and acceptance that neither can find in the rest of the world. Should Alice be dreaming, the only truly understanding and sympathetic friend she has would be just “a figment of [her] imagination” (Alice). She “[could] dream up someone whose half mad” because she “would have to be half mad to dream [the Mad Hatter] up” (Alice). The characters in Alice’s dream “are all mad…in a different way” because Alice, who dreamt them into existence, is also mad (“Finding Alice”). But, from the perspective of the audience, Alice is not real, either. She is simply a character recreated by Burton, whose identity originated in his imagination. If she is mad, it is only because he is himself. His anxieties have been projected onto Alice and hers, in turn, manifest in Underland.

This so-called madness emanates from an ongoing quest to find their identity and to adapt it so they can be accepted into the wider culture. In modern American culture, this existential search is frequently associated with adolescence, a period of uncertainty during which the individual retreats into his or her own skin, hoping to find reassurance from an internal voice like Alice’s Mad Hatter. Alice reflects many of the common traits of adolescence. Her “society expects [her] to be an adult in certain ways [she is] uncomfortable with,” especially in regards to her impending marriage to the bumbling, boring young British lord Hamish (“Finding Alice”). She feels pressure to be “something that’s unachievable, something that makes [her] feel inadequate” (Goodwin). She must not only be perfect, she must be perfect in the specific way that her society believes is perfect, and failing threatens her place in the community. Alice’s reactions to social expectations mirror Burton’s own. Neither appear to believe in these black-
and-white descriptions of reality and both behave as though stifled by the expectations of their cookie-cutter upbringings. To the audience familiar with Burton’s description of his childhood, it would seem as though Alice illustrates a fear of social ostracism that stepping over some predefined line would incur.

Typically, this struggle with status quo beliefs is associated with adolescence, but Burton attests that he has “just [has] always felt the same,” never quite managing to make it past the influence of his childhood environment (Breskin 47). Even his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which opened in 2009 and displayed pieces of work from the entirety of his career, was organized around Burbank, the town in which he grew up (Cashdan). Artistically, Burton has never grown past that childhood home and the beliefs that his upbringing instilled in him. Alice, like many of his other main characters, is “about imperfection and all the things we, as human beings, do wrong” (Goodwin). She exemplifies Burton’s belief in “real life” because her imperfections give her substance, making her an interesting and relatable character (Goodwin). The dreamlike quality of the film, the sudden movements of the camera and the washed out color of the surrounding environment in the opening scenes of Burton’s Alice lead the viewer to believe that the majority of her society, like modern American suburbia, seems much more surreal when compared with the innate humanity Burton dreamt into Alice and which she, in turn, dreamt into her Underland companions.

If adolescence generates a good deal of emotional pain, that energy must be channeled and put to some sort of use. Many times the violent reaction of the interior landscape leads to a wish for violence in the exterior, which Alice encounters in Underland. This physical solution again calls the nature of dreams into question. Alice believes she can wake up on her own command, simply with the small pain caused by a pinch. However, this technique does not
work, and neither do the more severe injuries incurred when the Dormouse stabs her with his sword or when the Bandersnatch rakes her arm with his claws, leaving a wound that, as the Cheshire Cat so kindly warns Alice, must be cleansed by “someone with evaporating powers or it will fester and putrefy” (Alice). Beyond these wounds which, although painful, are ultimately only flesh wounds, lies the darker threat of death. The Queen’s almost-humorous repetition of “off with his head!” presses home this reality, no matter how much she amuses the audience. To enter the Queen’s Castle, Alice must ford a moat full of floating human heads, the victims of the Queen’s cry for the ultimate punishment. By the time Alice faces the Jabberwock, the audience has witnessed enough actual danger and cruelty to understand that it will really be a fight to the death.

Unlike in previous versions of Alice, Alice’s danger does not subside once she literally crawls from the rabbit hole and reenters her daily life. Showing Alice pull herself from the rabbit hole emphasizes that her trip down the rabbit hole “wasn’t a dream at all, it was a memory” and had real repercussions for her physical well being (Alice). Even as Alice settles her affairs with her society, the evidence of her trip into Underland remains displayed on her arm. The wound she sustained from the Bandersnatch, while no longer infected, still has not completely healed on her arm, leaving a vividly red reminder that the danger she faced in Wonderland was very real. Facing life-threatening imperilment prepared Alice to confront the emotional and mental threats that the everyday world of Victorian England presented her with.

To escape the binding marriage contract her society expects her to enter into, however, Alice must be willing to become a businesswoman and put herself in even greater danger by expanding the trade routes of her employer. She suggests that the company be the first to trade with China, an ambition that will place her right into “a China that, under force of British arms,
has just been compelled to legalize the opium trade, cede Hong Kong and allow its citizens to be sent abroad as indentured servants” (Rohter). The British began illegally smuggling Indian-produced opium into China, forcing their way past authorities using force and bribery, and thus greatly endangering China’s social stability while enhancing British coffers (Newsinger). When the Chinese government objected to this abuse of their people, the British balked at losing a profitable source of income. In retaliation, they began the first of three opium wars, which steadily forced open China’s borders, bringing havoc and death to the people and forcing the government to accept increasingly degrading treaties (Newsinger). The danger that Alice will face in a political situation such as this, let alone on a ship sailing on the open seas, will be at least comparable to her experiences in Underland. The inspiring ending “where you have a heroine off to another adventure at the end,” rather than stifled by a seemingly inescapable social system, falls short of hopeful (Rohter).

The ending of Burton’s version of Alice in Wonderland is exceptionally dark, especially when compared to other versions of the story. But Burton does not believe this type of ending hinders the overall message, the transformation of the heroine as a self-actualized human being or the way children can relate to the text. He says that “if you grow up in an environment that is not passionate,” as both he and Alice did, “you have no choice but to have these dark fantasies” (Breskin 53). Having a sheltered childhood, one that protects you from the gritty aspects of life, does not prevent you from being alienated from the world around you. Instead, it makes you more likely to experiences the “darknesses” and “abstraction” around you (Breskin 53). The least perfect things are those that appear to be so on the surface, and “the only way to get through [the shadows cast by this looming respectability] is to explore it” (Breskin 53). Alice’s trip to Underland, just like Burton’s trip into Alice in Wonderland, is an attempt to explore these darker
spaces and to bring them into the light. Besides, “what is perceived as light and dark is completely open to interpretation” and his exploration of violence in Alice in Wonderland occurs in a surreal setting, one that could not actually occur around the audience (Salisbury, Burton 83). Making this exploration “literal was, [Burton] felt, making it darker, ultimately,” because then the audience believes they are more susceptible to the same dangers (Salisbury, Burton 83). The “light-hearted attitude to violence” a real-world setting would lend to the subject matter would have been much more threatening. Physical aggression in the real world cannot, unlike the Queen’s repetitive bellow of “Off with his head,” be interpreted as funny in any way, shape or form (Salisbury, Burton 143).

When approaching the text of Alice in Wonderland for the first time, Burton felt that there was a particular disjointedness to the text that previous remakes had only exaggerated. But he also understood how Carroll had used the episodic nature of his book to find the balance between success and disaster. The experience of recreating Alice in Wonderland was like “walking on a tightrope, juggling super-sharp knives” because Burton also took a chance by telling the story as he did, a modern drama about adolescence and self-actualization (Salisbury “Tim Burton”). What he had to hope, just as when he retold fairy tales at the beginning of his career, was that he had made good use of the “idea” of the story and that he was “true to [its] spirit” rather than its particulars (Salisbury, Burton 74). Burton hoped to express what he called the “Alice in Wonderland experience” to the audience by telescoping both the difficulty of accepting yourself and the time it takes to achieve that goal even if the society provides assistance (Salisbury, Burton 146). And while Burton has been around the Hollywood block enough to know that many people will find his work flawed, and each detractor will have his own particular reason, he takes solace in two facts. The first is that all creations are flawed. Just
as Alice’s imaginings reflect her own “madness,” the creations of all human beings reflect their shortcomings. Burton can only hope that his work will “be interestingly flawed, as opposed to boringly flawed” because then, at least, it will still express a strong message (Breskin 57). The second source of comfort comes directly from the White Queen. “You cannot live your life to please others,” she tells Alice, “the choice must be yours, because when you step out to face that creature, you will step out alone” (Alice). And that advice holds whether it is Alice facing the Jabberwock, or Burton facing his critics.
Conclusion: Unwriting, Rewriting and the Anxiety of Influence

Carroll, Disney and Burton each use Alice to express their anxiety about establishing a memorable persona that will ensure they are socially accepted. The fear of societal ostracization that each man feels is reflected back to Alice, who is subjected to varying degrees of danger, both socially and physically. On a personal scale, each man achieved the goals that he aimed for. Carroll, if he could not retain the same child-friends, at least provided himself with a way to cultivate new ones. Disney finally found a lasting niche for his company, ensuring that it would no longer need to subsist from paycheck to paycheck or bend their creative intuition to the will of outside distributors, so long as they satisfied their viewing public. Burton used the production of Alice like he used many of his other movies: as a form of therapy. By expressing his life-long alienation through the trials of a human girl, rather than a monstrous outsider, he gained sympathy from a wider audience, since the monster-as-hero motif common of his other films was not always relatable.

But no matter what each man accomplished for himself, he it seems he could ever feel quite satisfied until he believed he would be venerated not only during his lifetime, but by subsequent generations as well. Each man suffered from personal angst and also from the “anxiety of influence” placed on them by their predecessors (Bloom 1028). Even Carroll, who wrote the original Alice books and, therefore, appears to be free from this angst, suffered from the anxiety of genre. The fairy tale genre had become quite popular in Victorian literature, especially for children, and many of the tropes that Carroll made use of, and would be glad to know modern audiences attribute to him alone, were borrowed from works published by his contemporaries (Susina 82). He, like most other creative minds, could not “accept substitutions” in place of his “initial chance [to] alone” write about an unexplored aspect of the human
experience (Bloom 1030). Besides having the right to this intellectual property, being the first author to work in a certain style also secures that writer an immovable place in the cultural conscious for decades to come.

Carroll possessed a large collection of traditional folktales and fairy stories written by his contemporaries, such as Charles Kingsley, and the contents of his library provides inescapable evidence that he was aware of the existing literary tradition and how his works conformed to that tradition (Susina 80). However, he frequently pretended to have little knowledge of these authors, hoping the population at large, and certainly successive generations, would believe his literary achievements had sprung purely from unfounded creative genius. While that avowal proved to be bluntly inaccurate, Carroll did possess a literary genius for “innovation and reworking of pre-existing literary fairy tales for children” (Susina 83). Even when simply glancing through one of the Alice books, Carroll’s many parodies of well known verses, lyrics and poems make his frequent appropriation of knowledge quite clear. When Alice repeats “You are old, Father William” for the Caterpillar, for example, the words that Alice knows, and means to say, come out much differently than she expected. The pious verse she intended to recite was frequently used to teach children about the reward of dutiful observance of God’s mandates. However, the way she actually recites the verse removes all piety from the work. In Carroll’s counterfeit version, old man has aged gracefully because his egocentricity encouraged him to pay attention to his personal comforts, rather than religious observances (Carroll, Alice 42-5).

Rewriting this text allowed Carroll to comment upon growing and aging, the main focus of his Alice books, and to adopt culturally accepted values into his own work. Carroll established his own mastery of the English language and simultaneously proved the instability of his competitor’s work.
When Disney tackled Alice in Wonderland, there had already been a number of retellings made by the American film industry, and it was this history, coupled with Carroll’s original text, that Disney needed to overcome in order to create a film that would establish his place as the last teller of the story. The impossibility of accurately adapting a work of literature to film, just because of the very basic differences in the media being used for production, was a major hurdle for both Disney and Burton (Wojcik-Andrews 188). Disney addressed this issue by using striking images designed to “smash the aura of heritage” that surrounded Alice and “to celebrate [his own] ingenuity, inventiveness and genius” by focusing not on the story, but the farcical gags that he chose to incorporate into a heavily intellectual subject matter (Zipes, “Breaking” 31). Unfortunately, the public did not immediately embrace the film that Disney had hoped they would. As a result, Disney decided that “the film was a failure and blamed Carroll” for any of its shortcomings (Allan, “Disney’s” 211). Even though Disney had worked very hard to appropriate the material from Carroll and bend it to his own strengths, ensuring that he would receive all of the accolades when the film was a success, he was more than happy to relinquish any claim of originality when he feared that the work would harm his chances of being considered a ground-breaking director. Ironically, the movie became hugely popular after its original release, and has become the most well-known version of Alice.

Perhaps the plethora of Alice remakes, including Tim Burton’s, can be attributed to the “timelessness and imaginative richness” of classic children’s novels (Wojcik-Andrews 190). Burton’s version of the film does not play into the farcical nature of the early short films that had influenced Disney’s adaptation so heavily, but it does make use of another American filmmaking technique. He, like many others (including Disney), wanted Alice’s adventures to be more plot-driven, as if Alice had “a specific quest in mind” (Chaston 15). Unlike Disney,
however, Burton accomplished this goal and still ensured that the film remained true to the spirit of the text. Many people believe that Burton “has been making variations on Carroll his whole career” and that the film named for Alice is only the latest, though most likely not final, version (Cashdan). The film does, in many ways, revisit the themes of Burton’s earlier work just as much as it revisits the themes of Carroll’s story. Burton’s tendency to recycle the same material in many works worries him because he fears that he suffers from “the postmodern inability to conceive of anything new” and that, as a result, he merely attempts to imitate dead styles rather than creating something that at least appears new (Basil-Morozow 45). Even when remaking an older work, Burton strives to claim the text as his own intellectual property hoping that his version will deeply affect people.

No matter how many retellings of the same story exist, the integrity of the story, especially a resilient fairy tale like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, will remain. Each man, in rewriting an older story, does not merely degrade the value of the original story, as many detractors of movie adaptations believe. Often, recycling subject matter, as Carroll, Disney and Burton all did when establishing Wonderland, makes the writer more creative, rather than less so (Bloom 1029). In finding ways to appropriate older subject matter, the creator is aware of the material that existed previously, and takes extra care not to fall back onto clichés. And readdressing the same subject matter from so many perspectives allows the audience to explore the potential of the story, as if each new work “antithetically ‘completes’…the parent-[work]” by exploring all of the loose ends implicit within the text (Bloom 1032). Considering the act of retelling in this manner leaves the original, not the new, work lacking. A successful retelling convinces the audience that the original author “failed to go far enough” in his creative process
And yet, for the sake of clarity, a single author can only explore so many creative choices lest the cohesion of the work fall apart, causing the venture to fail completely.

All of these creative minds reach for the immortality that may not be physically possible, but that can be found in the public mind and cultural memory. Even as the men age, Alice remains static, a construction that captures one moment of time, an image that can be visited and revisited but which always remain the same. In the imaginary Alice, the Alice of the mind, Carroll finally found a way to stop aging. The little girl does not grow up, but even immortality does not benefit her alone. So long as Alice in Wonderland is read and watched, the man who created her cannot be forgotten. He will be remembered, and more than as just a writer, for each respective Alice embodies the ideals and the anxieties of the man who created her. She carries the memories of these men with her, and her youthful voice echoes with the egos of many creative minds.
Works Cited

Introduction

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Chapter 1


*Chapter 2*

*Alice in Wonderland*. Dir. Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson. Disney, 1951. DVD.


*Chapter 3*  


*Conclusion*


