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Critical Essay: Why Size Matters in Wonderland

Ask any person who's read Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" to explain its plot, and it's expected that they'll be at a loss. They might recall the eccentric menagerie of characters, perhaps a snatch of verse or a famous line of dialogue. Most likely than not they will relate to you the image of Alice growing and shrinking, of the cake that says "EAT ME" and the potion labeled "DRINK ME." But it's the context of Alice's metamorphoses that concern me. I returned to this childhood favorite with an agenda of my own: to find whether Alice's changes in size were governed by a consistent set of laws -- and if so, what consequences did they have for her and the denizens of Wonderland? Furthermore, I wanted to understand what greater meaning lied behind these differences in scale. In typical *Carroll* fashion, I was rather surprised and amused by my findings.

Alice experiences her first change in size immediately upon entering the rabbit hole. This is not made explicitly clear by the text, but Alice's shift in demeanor is in full support of my claim. The hole is simply described as "large," and since Alice is a child there's no reason to assume that she has shrunk, but how then to account for the long fall and the subsequent safe landing? Alice assumes that she's falling either very far ("four thousand miles down")ⁱ or she's somehow discovered a novel way to fall slowly. The only working explanation would be that she has decreased in size. When Alice initially falls, it's far too dark to see anything. Alice needs the visual element to orient her to her surroundings; temporary blindness would render her unaware that any internal transformation has taken place.

There's another element to the darkness that affects Alice, and that is specifically her defined sense of self. Memory is closely linked to identity, and throughout Alice's time in Wonderland she struggles with both. Alice, as it's been remarked, also goes through a succession of physical metamorphoses. I will argue that all of these things is of equal importance, both to the story and to the internal geographies of Wonderland. Again, we are searching for the "why" when it comes to Alice's changes in size and her failure to remember any facts immediately after the fall. The darkness she experiences is quite a literal one, though it's not enough to account for her total loss of identity:

‘Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: I was the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!’ And she began thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them.ⁱⁱ

Upon landing, Alice follows the White Rabbit down a passageway that leads to a hall of locked doors. The passage is either badly lit or the ceiling is very high, because it “was all dark overhead.” However, the hall is defined as “long [and] low,”ⁱⁱⁱ something around nine feet in height. The rabbit is missing – assumedly he’s gone to his house to fetch his kid gloves and fan. Alice peeks behind a curtain in the hall, discovering a hidden door only fifteen inches tall! But like the others there it is locked, and requires a key – from atop a table completely made of glass – to unlock it. Behind the door is a garden, though it’s not made immediately clear whether the garden matches the scale of the door¹. It is here in the hall that Alice undergoes her first conscious size metamorphosis.

¹ We’ll learn that the garden is part of the palace grounds, so everything within it must be playing card sized.

While not immediately noticed by Alice, the glass table also features the infamous bottle with the label ‘DRINK ME’ tied around its neck. Alice ponders its contents, and then quickly finishes the potion off. The result is that she shrinks down so that she’s perfectly sized to enter the garden. The problem is, she’s forgotten the key! We can thank the glass table for clarifying Alice’s folly. I’d even suggest that if the table weren’t glass, Alice wouldn’t even have the *memory* of the key being on it in the first place. Upon realizing her error, Alice cries a little, but then discovers a tiny cake with the words ‘EAT ME’ spelled out in currants. She wonders to herself, “Well I’ll eat it... and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door.”^{iv} Alice puts her hand on the top of her head to judge which way she will grow, and ends up growing leagues beyond her natural size. At this point we only have enough evidence to assume that drinking certain liquids make you shrink and eating certain foods make you grow. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

Aside from the food and drink, there are other means – that we’ll call objects of power – that facilitate the transformation process. One of these is the White Rabbit’s fan, which Alice acquires in her giantess state. She doesn’t understand the fan’s power, which is why she nearly fans herself out of existence. This is to say, the fan allows her to shrink smaller than four inches. But a fan can blow hot air as well as cool, so might we assume that it has the ability to *grow* the user as well? Consider that the White Rabbit likely uses it upon entering (and exiting) the palace grounds, though he generally takes the form of a normal-sized rabbit. Could this strange power be coming from the fan alone, or have we misread prior events too shallowly? Is it possible that Alice makes the unconscious choice to shrink as she is fanning herself?

I believe the answer to this question lies somewhere between the White Rabbit's house and the Caterpillar's mushroom. Alice magically transitions from the long hall to outside the White Rabbit's house. The rabbit has mistaken her for his maid – Alice is still very tiny at this moment – and has requests that she collect a fan and a new pair of gloves for him. Strangely, Alice is properly sized for the rabbit's house while just a moment ago she was no bigger than a mouse. I call this The Wonderland Effect, and will return to it at a later time. Moving on with the tale, Alice finds the gloves and the fan, but she also discovers an unmarked potion near the looking-glass. Now the bottle has no obvious function – not even a label – in the White Rabbit's home. Yet when Alice drinks it, it perfectly goes with her wish that “it'll make [her] grow large again, for really [she's] quite tired of being such a tiny little thing.”^v But things are even curiouser than first imagined. When giant Alice is bombarded by pebbles that turn into cakes (don't ask), Alice gets an idea: “If I eat one of these cakes... it's sure to make *some* change in my size; and as it can't possibly make me larger, it must make me smaller, I suppose.”^{vi} She swallows a cake, and shrinks to a manageable size and escapes the house.

If you have been paying attention, the last time Alice drank from a bottle she shrank, and the last time she ate a cake she grew. Now this time the two objects have switched their effects. A continuity error, or is this deliberate on Carroll's part? I think it's rather suspicious and worth investigating the fact that neither the cakes or the drink that Alice consumes in the White Rabbit's home are labeled like their counterparts in the hall. Yet, as before, they do exactly the thing that Alice was hoping they'd do. As the Caterpillar will prove, this is no mere coincidence.

When Alice first comes upon the Caterpillar, he asks the ultimate question: “Who are *you*?” By this point, Alice has hardly sorted her proper size, much less her true identity. His question calls into sharp relief the difficulty Alice has had remembering even simple facts during her time in Wonderland. The Caterpillar doesn’t offer much advice aside from “Keep your temper,”^{vii} which is ironic in light of the events that close the story. The Caterpillar tells Alice that in time she will get used to her new size, but Alice shows great distress at this notion, so the Caterpillar takes pity and gives her an enormous nudge in the right direction. While making his exit, the Caterpillar mutters to himself, “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.” He is referring to the mushroom, which as we all know is round and has no “sides” to speak of. This is a knowing contradiction, as well as the answer to all of our questions. Like the fan, the mushroom causes Alice to shrink (only at first, in her uncertainty of the mushroom’s power) and to grow – seemingly without bounds!

Alice may not realize just how important this development is, but we as readers should. When I began my study into Alice’s adventure in Wonderland, I came looking for insights into the function and mechanics behind Alice’s changes in size. What we’ve seen so far is a portrait of inconsistency: food occasionally makes Alice grow and at other times shrink, and drink has shown inverted properties as well! But the one thing in common during all these changes is that Alice was hoping for the specific changes that would occur to her. With the aid of these objects of power, Alice wills her metamorphoses into being. The talk of “one side makes you grow/shrink” simply means that it’s in Alice’s power to decide how she will change. In the end, when she reclaims her identity, Alice will learn that she doesn’t require any objects to invoke change.

Two things preoccupy Alice during her time in Wonderland:

‘The first thing I’ve got to do,’ said Alice to herself, as she wandered about in the wood, ‘is to grow to my right size again; and the second thing is to find my way into that lovely garden. I think that will be the best plan.’^{viii}

And indeed, for the better part of this story Alice will struggle with her surroundings and changes in size until she reaches the garden. But to “grow to my right size again” is a completely different task. Her “right size” is her true size – her true self – and is not to be found in Wonderland. To paraphrase the Cheshire Cat, Alice wouldn’t be down there unless she was mad. I have found no evidence to equate size to madness in Wonderland, but consider how almost nothing there is properly sized: the Mad Hatter and March Hare are much larger than the Queen of Hearts, and the Caterpillar – possibly the most sensible creature of them all – is also the smallest. But aside from being small, the Caterpillar is properly sized (and aware of his height): exactly three inches. What does this mean for Alice?

Alice takes on many sizes, by accident and on purpose. Alice is even influenced by Wonderland itself to go through changes. In these moments there is nothing that Alice has ate or drank to cause a change: she has allowed herself to be influenced by the environment. These changes are what I would call The Wonderland Effect, because it doesn’t require conscious approval to occur. I would say that this is the true cause of madness in Wonderland. If size is equated to memory and self, then the slow degradation of identity leads to eventual psychosis. A child may turn into a pig; an eccentric tea party may proceed ad infinitum. Even the Queen herself experience screaming fits (“Off with her head!”), while no one is actually ever harmed at all. We see now that size plays a far greater role for the denizens of Wonderland than previously imagined.

For example, the “Effect” asserts itself during the trial of the Knave of Hearts with the reappearance of the Mad Hatter. In the overall scheme of “Wonderland,” it is rare for Carroll’s narrative to revisit locations or characters, though at times it does. The denizens of the Mad Tea Party provide an interesting bit of continuity – or discontinuity. It’s all too easy to forget that Alice transitioned directly from the tea party to the hall of doors (thanks to a conveniently located portal in a tree) in order to reach the garden. We can only assume that the Hatter and company took the same route, but since the “DRINK ME” potion is exhausted (Alice uses her mushroom the second time), they must have had some help. While the Dormouse says, “I grow at a reasonable pace,”^{ix} he really should be remarking on how he shrinks. Unlike madness, change isn’t a constant in Wonderland.

Alice regains her true size (and her true identity) but once in this story, at the trial that concludes her time in Wonderland. Alice begins the trial in a shrunken state, which is how she was sized to enter the beautiful garden. However, the garden proved to be an enormous disappointment, as it was filled with just as much madness as the rest of the world. During the trial it’s clear that Alice has become totally fed up with the rudeness and the nonsense of the locals, because as she sits in the juror’s box she begins to grow in size. I think that on one hand she’s inspired to grow when she sees the Mad Hatter take a bite out of his teacup – an object you’re regularly supposed to drink of – and that it’s a reminder she doesn’t have to remain in her station if she chooses not to. On the other hand, she by this point has begun to reclaim her old identity as Alice. She has overcome the influence of Wonderland² to the point where she is nearly her old self again. I say nearly because in order to truly be Alice, she must be sized like Alice.

² Unlike the poor Mock-Turtle, who once was “a real turtle” but has devolved.

And so Alice begins to grow, eventually “to her full size,” when she is attacked by the armies of Wonderland in a desperate attempt to maintain disorder. But Alice brushes them off: “you’re nothing but a pack of cards!”^x Alice has regained clarity, and it isn’t too long before she exits Wonderland and re-enters reality. Alice then departs the banks of the river, where she has fallen asleep and experienced her adventure. We are left with a final thought, presented to us by Alice’s sister. It is the sister’s honest wish that Alice is able to retain the simple joys of childhood as she grows into womanhood, with all of its changes. Alice’s sister is able to perceive Wonderland in a half-dreaming state, so we as readers can rest easy knowing that Alice can fall back upon this nonsense-land, should she ever need a reminder of who she is truly meant to be.

ⁱ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Penguin Books, 1962), 25.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 36.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 27.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 31.

^v *Ibid.*, 54.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 60.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 65-67.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 61.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 144.

^x *Ibid.*, 157.