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**Feminist Analysis of the Novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)**

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Feminist Analysis of the Novel Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865)

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## Abstract

There are two contradictory views of the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* regarding feminism. By studying the historical background of the novel and closely examining the details in the book, this paper argues that, despite some anti-feminism traits, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has stronger feminist effect, and it has potential to be feminist as shown in the 2010 adapted film.



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### Feminist Analysis of the Novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (commonly shortened to *Alice in Wonderland*) is an 1865 novel written by English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, whose pseudonym is Lewis Carroll. The book is one of the most influential fairy tales around the world, and it has been widely reviewed and earned almost unconditional praise in the past 150 years. It has been translated into 174 languages, and it is one of the world's most widely translated works of literature. The sequel of this book *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* was published in 1872. There are several versions of film adaptations of this book, among which the most famous one is the 2010 *Alice in Wonderland* directed by Tim Burton.

The novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has provoked many discussions about feminism. Scholars hold two totally opposite views towards this topic. Some claim that Alice is a little girl who falls into the rabbit hole by accident, and she lacks control of the things happen in the wonderland; others hold the opinion that Alice is a feminist who frees herself from stereotypical female traits by escaping to the wonderland. All scholars provide details to prove their ideas, and we should not only stick to one side. Despite some anti-feminism traits, this novel has more feminist effect regarding the historical background, and it has potential to be feminist as shown in the 2010 adapted film.

The background of this novel is Victoria's era (1837-1901), it was a period when gender roles were very clearly defined. Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854) represents society's expectations for women at that time. In the poem, the poet describes his wife whom he believes is a model for all women. In Patmore's point of view, women were encouraged to be "passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all – pure." Additionally, he emphasizes women's

belonging to the domestic sphere: women's basic duty was to be mothers, and they were completely dependent on their husbands who were allowed to work outside the house and earn money.

One might think that having a woman (Queen Victoria) as the ultimate power authority would imply an improvement for the role that women had in society. However, Queen Victoria was completely against the suffragette movement and "she constantly reiterated her own opposition to women's rights and her firm belief that her sex belonged in its own separate, domestic sphere" (qtd. in Romera 2). She also "regularly made protestations of her sex's inferiority and intellectual inadequacy" (qtd. in Romera 2). Therefore, women were socially inferior than men at that time.

At Victorian era, "fear of a woman acquiring knowledge" is also a common idea. This idea comes from Eve and Adam's story: Eve's curiosity to explore makes Adam eat the fruit of knowledge, which results in the "fall" of humankind. Therefore, women's curiosity and knowledge were seen as a threat to patriarchy at that time.

In the essay "Revising Alice in Wonderland: An Analysis of Alice's Female Subjectivity in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Professor Sara Bermejo Romera from University of Barcelona points out that this book is a "fiction as escapism." She argues that Alice, who represents women in that era, is under too much oppression and she challenges the strict patriarchal hierarchy by escaping to the wonderland. Romera continues saying that "fictional narratives" is a good way to challenge gender roles in that oppressive society. Adding elements that challenged the strict patriarchal hierarchy in realistic stories could result in "censorship or punishment from governmental authorities" (Romera 3) at that time.

Scholars who hold the feminism view also believe that Alice rejects and frees herself from stereotypical female traits. Professor Romera mentions that the creation of

wonderland itself is the first refusal of the aspects that Victorian society encourages. Alice decides to abandon the lady-like accepted activities that she and her sister are supposed to do in their free time. Alternatively, she decides to follow the white rabbit that attracts her attention. In “She Can Do It: Messages of Female Empowerment in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*,” Professor Megan Dickinson from St. Cloud State University points out that Alice mentions herself has fallen from the roof of her home. From strict Victorian women propriety, it seems impossible that young Victorian girls found themselves on the roof. Therefore, Professor Dickinson believes that by introducing this passage so early in the text, Carroll sets the stage for readers to understand that Alice is not the typical Victorian girl. Moreover, in “Liberated Alice: Dodgson's female hero as domestic rebel,” the author Judith Little comments on Alice’s behaviors in *Wonderland* by saying “her assertiveness, activity, and curiosity are distinctively ‘Un-Victorian’ traits” (Little 5).

Curiosity is the most important feminist trait in Alice. In “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (By Lewis Carroll) – A Feminist Analysis,” the book reviewer Sonal Chauhan restates Eve and Adam’s story and says that women’s desire to explore has had an impression of destructive consequence associated with it. “In this light, presenting the story of a girl’s pursuit of her desires is ground-breaking,” says Chauhan. In addition, Romera gives some examples at this point. For instance, Alice ignores her manners to satisfy her curiosity by eating unknown food or entering places where she has not been formally invited, but she is never punished for her curious behavior.

On the contrary, some scholars hold anti-feminism views. In “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland as an Anti-Feminist Text: Historical, Psychoanalytical and Postcolonial Perspectives*,” scholar Flair Donglai Shi from University of Oxford argues that Alice is only a “girl”, and “girl” is different from “woman”. She continuously saying that Alice



is a girl belonging to a separate social group of “innocent middle-class female children” (Shi 8) rather than a general category of Victorian women. Therefore, the novel has nothing to do with feminism.

In “‘Curiouser and Curiouser’”: Discouraging Female Agency and Curiosity in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” Julia Schorn brings up her idea that Alice doesn’t actually have much control over her experiences in Wonderland. She points out that the story has a passive beginning: as soon as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, she is thrust into a “nonsensical world” that seems to defy everything she knows from daily life. Also, Alice can’t control the size of her body -- she is constantly growing and shrinking. What’s more, Alice is constantly “undermined, talked over, and ignored” (Schorn 2), made “powerless and silent” (Schorn 2) by other animals such as the Caterpillar. Moreover, At the end of the story, Alice returns to her sister’s side, which indicates that she returns to the role that society has for her. Therefore, Schorn believes that Wonderland is unchanged by any female action.

Besides Alice, there are three other female characters in the novel: the Duchess, the Duchess’ cook (maid), and the Queen of Hearts. The Book reviewer Chauhan claims “they are the most senseless and violent characters in the book.” The Duchess represents adult women who are emotionally unpredictable. She is impatient to Alice the first time they meet, but very friendly to her the second time. The maid is also violent and she hits the Duchess with plates very often. The Queen of Hearts is a cruel monarch who says “off with her/his/their head” constantly. She is dominating, violent, irrational, and therefore unfit for decision-making. Chauhan argues that this portrayal suggests that and women should not have power and should be kept domestic. The King, on the other hand, is a merciful and kind man who is more suitable as a ruler.

Scholar Shi does a lot of research and finds out that the Carroll is actually a

misogynist and pedophile, and that's why there is antagonism between negative-portrayed adult women and innocent Alice. Carroll idealized young girls and was not as fond of women, which was manifested in his desire for his female child friends to stay young and small, and the fact that no concrete romantic interest in or proven sexual relationship within mature female was evident in his life (Shi 14). Carroll's special love for little girls is also evident in his intimate friendship with the muse of Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice Liddell, as noted by his many biographers. Carroll, despite his preference to make friends with little girls and his desire to preserve their innocence and purity, seems to have always held pessimistic views regarding the future for these little girls. Throughout his career as a child photographer, Carroll "detested 'grownup' children, especially girls who aped adult fashions" (qtd. in Shi 17).

Although Alice is a child and doesn't have much control of the things at first, she does act in a feminist way. Her active spirit overshadows her passivity with the rise of her self-confidence and integrity. Her curiosity is fulfilled, and she becomes an astute player in *Wonderland*.

To begin with, falling into the rabbit-hole is not a passive act, it is a choice that Alice makes by herself. At the beginning of the story, Alice sits on the bank with her sister, she finds that the book her sister reads is boring because it does not have pictures or conversations. She further decides it is not worth the trouble to pick daisies to make a daisy chain. Instead, she fulfills her curiosity by chasing the rabbit:

Burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. (Carroll 3)

In this first scene of the book, Alice already shows her feminist spirit to oppose the traditional female gender role, as a contrast to her sister, who wears time by reading

books without picture and makes daisy chains.

Wonderland is far from what Alice is used to, so she loses control of things at first. She experiences identity crisis and asks herself “who in the world am I?” (Carroll 19). She feels lonely and only wants to go home. When she is trapped in the rabbit’s room, she thinks “it was much pleasanter at home, when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits. I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole” (Carroll 46). In addition, Alice is polite to other animals such as the caterpillar and the rabbit, and she does what they say.

However, Alice’s character develops during her journey in the wonderland. The longer she spends in Wonderland, the more she gets used to it, and she gradually takes control of things.

Alice’s development is shown in chapter VII “A Mad Tea-Party” when she encounters the March Hare, the Dormouse and the Hatter.

“No room! No room!” they cried out when they saw Alice coming. “There’s plenty of room!” said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table. (Carroll 96)

In this dialogue, Alice ignores their scream of “no room” and makes the decision by using her own eyes. What’s more, when March Hare asks her to have some wine but there actually does not have any, Alice shows her anger directly: “then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it” (Carroll 96). When March Hare replies to her: “it wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” she answers rationally: “I didn’t know it was your table, it’s laid for a great many more than three” (Carroll 96). Moreover, Alice’s character is also created by her reaction with the Hatter. When the Hatter tells her that she needs a haircut, she points out his rudeness by saying: “you should learn not to make personal remarks” (Carroll 96). Finally, she decides not to bear the Hatter’s

rudeness anymore: “she got up in great disgust, and walked off” (Carroll 110).

In Alice’s interaction with the three, she acts as an independent thinker who vigorously argues for her own rights. Instead of following etiquette and doing what is expected, she claims autonomy, and this is the way that Alice displays her control mastery in such a treacherous world.

Alice also dares to challenge the authority. When she sees the Queen, she tells herself “they’re only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!” (Carroll 110) When the Queen asks Alice who are the three gardeners, she replies: “How should I know? It’s no business of mine” (Carroll 116). The Queen gets angry by Alice’s reply and she screams “off with her head,” but Alice is not afraid at all:

“Nonsense!” said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent. (Carroll 118)

The climax of Alice’s challenge of authority appears in the last trial scene. Throughout the scene, Alice gradually grows larger and larger in physical size, to which the King, feeling threatened, later remarks: “Rule Forty-two. All persons more than a mile high to leave the court” (Carroll 180). Alice knows this is nonsense and challenges the King stating that he just made it up, to which he says, “It’s the oldest rule in the book” (Carroll 180). Alice then shows more astuteness and confidence which makes the King dumbfounded and quiet: “Then it ought to be Number One” (Carroll 180).

There’s also a conversation between Alice and the Queen in this scene:

“No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.”

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Alice loudly. “The idea of having the sentence first!”

“Hold your tongue!” said the Queen, turning purple.

“I won’t!” said Alice.

“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.)  
 “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll 187)

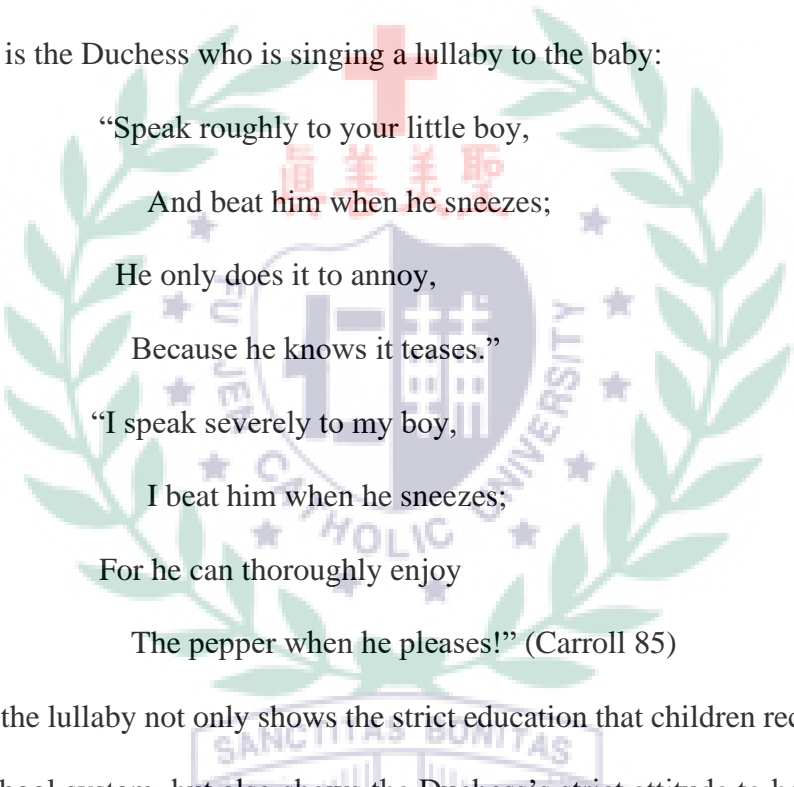
Alice thinks the King and Queen have gone too far in the illogical trial, and she expresses her opinion as an independent thinker. Alice matures at last, and she does not care if she is acting within the boundaries of correct etiquette and regulations. As a child, Alice not only contradicts adults with her logic and reason, but also opposes the King and the Queen who symbolize supreme power bravely. Therefore, Alice can be seen as a rebel in the Victorian age.

Another evidence to prove Alice does not follow the stereotypical Victorian women features is her refusal of motherhood. There’s a scene that Alice has grown tremendously in height after eating a bit of mushroom, and the Pigeon regards her as a serpent who wants to eat its eggs. Alice distances herself from motherhood by stating that, “little girls eat eggs as much as serpents do” (Carroll 73). Further on in the story, Alice is given the responsibility of taking care of the Duchess’s baby. She “felt quite relieved” when she sees baby-pig into the wood (Carroll 88), which shows that she has no sympathy or affection for the baby, and she doesn’t want to fulfill her duty as a mother in her future life.

After waking up, Alice returns to her sister’s side, and this is one of the reasons why some scholars believe her behavior cannot be considered subversive to gender norms. However, after Alice tells her sister about her dream, her sister imagines what Alice will be like when she grows up: she is surrounded by children, and she’s telling stories of Wonderland (Carroll 192). Therefore, Alice is not portrayed as a traditional “angel in the house” in her sister’s imagination. What’s more, the fact that Alice abandons this subversive dream-dimension does not imply her acceptance of the ideal Victorian woman model. She still has the high possibility to make her own life choices and

become the woman that she wants to be, regarding her behaviors in the Wonderland. Moreover, before waking up, Alice is bound by the distorted judiciary farce, waking up shows Alice finally opposes the highest of powers in Wonderland who represent the summit of nonsense and madness. Therefore, she is in absolute control, overpowering Wonderland.

For the three female characters whom some scholars define as negative, all embody feminist traits if we look at them in another side. The first female character that Alice comes upon is the Duchess who is singing a lullaby to the baby:



“Speak roughly to your little boy,  
And beat him when he sneezes;  
He only does it to annoy,  
Because he knows it teases.”  
“I speak severely to my boy,  
I beat him when he sneezes;  
For he can thoroughly enjoy  
The pepper when he pleases!” (Carroll 85)

The lyric of the lullaby not only shows the strict education that children received in the Victorian school system, but also shows the Duchess’s strict attitude to her baby. It is obvious that the Duchess does not like her role as a mother. She gives the baby “a violent shake at the end of every line,” and when she sings the second verse, she “kept tossing the baby violently up and down” (Carroll 85). She carelessly “flinging the baby” to Alice and hurries to play croquet with the Queen (Carroll 86). Once the baby turns into a pig in Alice’s arms and runs away, the Duchess never asks for its whereabouts. What’s more, the Duchess is also aggressive towards Alice, who is considered as a child. When Alice says she doesn’t know cats smile, the Duchess replies “you don’t know

much, and that's a fact," in a tone that Alice "did not at all like" (Carroll 83). When Alice asks the Duchess to be careful of the plates and dishes that hit her, the Duchess replies "in a hoarse growl": "If everybody minded their own business, the world would go round a deal faster than it does" (Carroll 84). When Alice shows her knowledge about the rotation of the earth, the Duchess replies impatiently with extreme fierce word: "talking of axes, chop off her head" (Carroll 84).

In Victorian belief, it is compulsory for women to have children and take care of the children. What the Duchess has done is the subversion of the image of the ideal loving mother that Victorian society valued. Scholars who hold the anti-feminism view argue that the Duchess represents negative Victorian female women who have unstable emotion -- the second time she meets Alice she becomes "friendly and cheerful" (Carroll 131) while the first time she is aggressive. From feminist view, however, not only her aggressive temper rebels against the ideal "meek and gentle" feature in Victorian women, but also the change in mood suggests her appreciation for Alice "throw away" her baby.

The second female character that Alice encounters is the Duchess' maid, the Cook, who is not the prototypical model of the obedient and fearful maid:

The cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby—the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her. (Carroll 83)

Hitting the mistress is the kind of behavior that would be completely unthinkable for a Victorian housemaid. It seems that Duchess is used to this because she does not have too much reaction even when she gets hit. From this scene, we can also infer that the Cook puts much pepper in the soup deliberately, in order to cause her mistress to sneeze.



In addition, the Cook also carries out this kind of rebellious behavior against higher authorities such as the King in the final jury scene:

“Give your evidence,” said the King.

“Shan’t,” said the cook. (Carroll 174)

For some minutes the whole court was in confusion, getting the Dormouse turned out, and, by the time they had settled down again, the cook had disappeared. (Carroll 175)

She does not offer any evidence and disappears without the King’s permission. Therefore, the Cook can also be seen as a female rebel at Victorian age. She represents not only women from gender, but also working-class women from low social class.

The third and last female character is the Queen of Hearts. Scholars who support anti-feminist view hold the idea that the Queen is not suitable for decision-making, which suggests women should be kept domestic. Although she is not a good representative of a powerful authority, she plays a dominant role in the marital relationship, which indicates feminism. The roles of Victorian society are inverted in this couple where she is the one that makes the decisions whilst he is portrayed as completely dependent, fearful and submissive. For example:

The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. “Off with his head!” She said without even looking round.

“I’ll fetch the executioner myself,” said the King eagerly, and he hurried off. (Carroll 126)

When the Queen wants to take off Alice’s head:

The King laid his hand upon her arm, and timidly said, “Consider, my dear: she is only a child!” (Carroll 118)

Under her tyranny, the King becomes infantile and weak. His masculinity and



dominance are gone, which is very much the opposite of what Victorian England promoted.

The concept of feminism, first introduced in 1837, was still in its infancy when the novel was published. After more than 140 years, the feminist traits in Alice is expanded in the 2010 adapted film, and it helps prove the potential of the novel to be feminist.

In the film, the first most important change that Burton undertakes is depicting Alice as a young woman instead of a child. As a young woman, Alice is far more likely to face restrictive female expectations of the Victorian era.

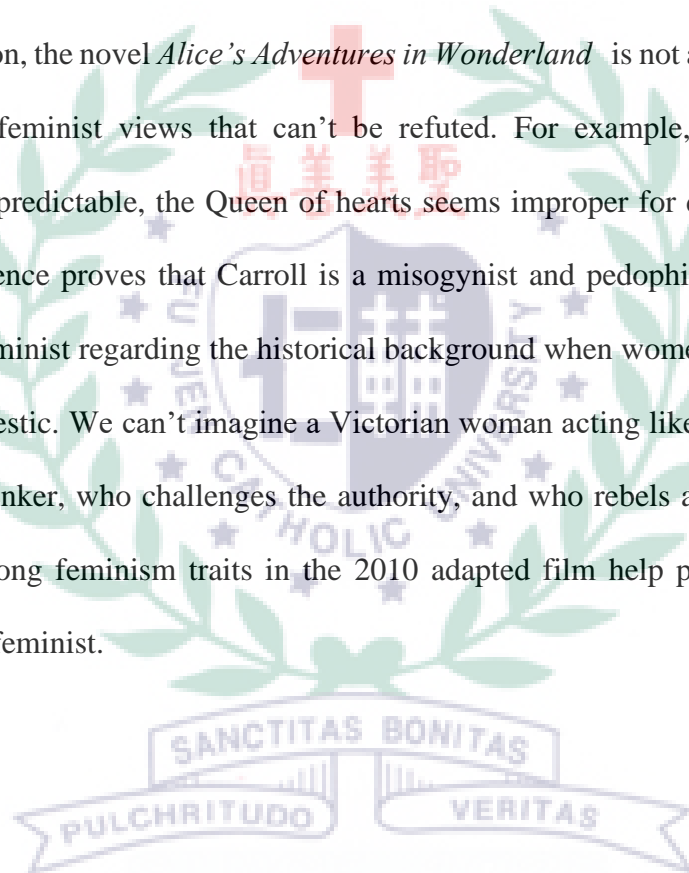
At the beginning of the story, Alice refuses to wear stockings and a corset, which is expected for women. Her mom is displeased and says what she wears is not proper. She refutes her mom: “who is to say what is ‘proper’?” Then there is the party scene. It is actually Alice’s engagement party, but she is the only one who doesn’t know this, because this marriage is out of her mother’s wish. She is going to be proposed by the wealthy man Hamish. While dancing with Hamish, Alice asks him: “do you ever tired of quadrille?” Also, she is distracted and amused by her “visions” that all ladies in trousers and men wears dresses. Hamish then urges her to keep the visions to herself and remain silent, which shows he is trying to oppress Alice’s imagination. Finally, Alice doesn’t accept the proposal, and follows the rabbit, running out of the party instead.

These beginning feminist scenes already show not only Alice’s rebellious behaviors to social norms, but also her curiosity and vivid imagination.

In the wonderland, the inhabitants try to have Alice believe in her power, and they say that she is the only one who can murder the dragon and save the Wonderland. After struggling for a while, Alice finally decides to become a warrior in full armor, and she kills the dragon.

After returning from the wonderland, Alice officially rejects Hamish's marriage proposal by saying "you are not the right man for me." She also tells her mother: "I love you, but this is my life, I will decide what to do with it." The last scene in the film is that Alice sails off independently to China to begin her career in a business world, which is dominated by men. Therefore, the film shows more obvious feminist traits than the novel. Alice challenges the patriarchal society and social's expectations for Victorian women.

In conclusion, the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is not all feminist, there are some anti-feminist views that can't be refuted. For example, the Duchess is emotionally unpredictable, the Queen of hearts seems improper for decision making, and some evidence proves that Carroll is a misogynist and pedophile. However, the novel is still feminist regarding the historical background when women were expected to be kept domestic. We can't imagine a Victorian woman acting like Alice who is an independent thinker, who challenges the authority, and who rebels against the social norms. The strong feminism traits in the 2010 adapted film help prove the novel's potential to be feminist.



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