

On Lewis Carroll's View of Children's Education in *Alice in Wonderland*

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Abstract

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is full of absurd plots and perverse characters. At the same time, it also reflects the social reality of Britain in the late 19th century, especially the reality of children's education in the Victorian period. This paper holds that Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* not only implies the author's irony to Victorian children's education and the subversion to traditional rigid moral preaching at that time, but also reflects his child-oriented view of education.

Keywords

Lewis Carroll; *Alice in Wonderland*; Children-oriented View of Education.

1. Introduction

In British history, with a large number of children's literature writers and works emerging in the Victorian period, British children's literature enters the golden age. Among them, Lewis Carroll's two novels on "Alice" have become one of the most outstanding representative works. Until now, Carroll has become the most translated whriter in other languages after Shakespeare. *Alice in Wonderland*, published in 1865, tells a story with magical fantasy. A 7-year-old girl named Alice accidentally fell into the underground world and went through a series of strange experience. It shows us an underground fantasy world with absurdities. However, the perverse characters and bizarre plots in the story are not entirely out of imagination. It is also a reflection of the British real world in the late 19th century, especially the reality of children's education in British Victorian period. In the second half of the 19th century, the British economy developed rapidly. Influenced by Rousseau and romantic writer Wordsworth, the Victorian view of children also showed more complex characteristics. In short, innocent children and evil children are the two mainstream views on children in the Victorian period [1]. As an outstanding fantasy novelist, in *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll not only shows the irony towards children's education in Victorian age, but also reflects his view of Children-oriented education.

2. An Irony on the Dogmatic Model of Children's Education

In the mid-19th century, with the development and advancement of the industrial revolution, the middle class appeared and rose. With the accumulation and increase of social wealth, the middle class has more time to pay attention to children's education. "The middle class has a strong sense of childhood. They believe that children are different from adults, and childhood is an independent stage in life" [1]. Fairy tales have also become an important activity for children's reading, education and entertainment. All these promote the prosperity of Victorian children's literature. The existing rigid and didactic children's literature could not meet the reading needs at that time. Therefore, the publication of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll is regarded as a people-oriented publication the history of children's literature[2], advocates the freedom of children's ideology. Thus, the fantasy literature, which is full of imagination and childlike interest, is booming.

The education Alice as a child receives in the real world reflects the idealized requirement for a child's image in the Victorian period. The creation of *Alice in Wonderland* originated from a story "Alice's underground adventures" told by Carroll and the three daughters of his colleague from Oxford University when they were boating on the Thames one summer afternoon in 1962. A little girl named Alice became the prototype of the protagonist Alice in the story. Alice in the story was also born in a middle-class family. She was polite, smart and brave. At the beginning of the story, Alice fell into a very deep hole with a talking rabbit because of curiosity. In the long process of falling, she got a jar and found it empty, but she didn't throw the empty jar because she was afraid of hitting someone; She also thought of curtsy after landing and warned herself not to ask questions casually, for fear of being regarded as an ill-bred little girl. When she fell down, she comforted herself, "After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn't say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!" [3] when she grew older and couldn't control, she cried and told herself, "Come, there's no use in crying like that!... I advise you to leave off this minute!" [3]

The children's image of Alice not only shows the idealized image of children in the Victorian era, but also shows the irony to secularity and education in the social and cultural context of the Victorian industrial revolution. When Alice first raised the identity question of "who am I", she thought she would not become another person who is stupid, because she knew everything, and began to test herself by reciting the multiplication tables and geographical knowledge she knew, but she did like this, "four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is--oh dear! I shall never get to twenty at that rate! However, the Multiplication-Table doesn't signify: let's try Geography. London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome--no, that's all wrong, I'm certain!" [3] This reflects the school's emphasis on rote learning and dogmatic education model at that time. In Chapter 3, the mouse behaves like a master to other to tell British history, but it is so boring that it has been interrupted many times by small animals. It is really "the driest thing I ever known" claimed by the mouse, so that Alice said after listening, "as wet as ever" and "it doesn't seem to dry me at all"[3]. The word "dry" is a pun and so humorous. As a teacher, the mouse's teaching content is so boring that it can't arouse the students' interest. In Chapter 9, The Fake Turtle tells the story of his sea school. The curriculum is diverse and complex, which seems to make it difficult for students to speak clearly, and it also reflects the complexity and rigidity of the school curriculum. In the seemingly illogical and clueless underground world, although it is full of strange ideas and fantasies, and looks extremely exaggerated, it actually contains irony in the real world.

In the sixth chapter, the countess's lullaby reflects the educational way of destroying children's body and mind.

"Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:

...

I speak severely to my boy,
I beat him when he sneezes;" [3]

After singing a lullaby, she would shake the baby severely, or throw the baby up and down violently. When she asks Alice to take care of the baby, she also threw it over to her. Such a rude treatment of children seems to maintain the authority of adults, but children are oppressed and subjected to physical and mental humiliation and violence in their growth.

Although Carroll described an illusory and absurd underground world in the form of fairy tales, in fact, under such fairy tale context many practical problems in the real world are reflected and the dogmatic educational model at that time can also be shown.

3. A Subversion to the Traditional Rigid Moral Preaching

Traditional children's literature generally plays a role in preaching about children's morality. Many stories in Grimm's fairy tales and Andersen's fairy tales convey the ideas about truth, goodness and beauty. Usually sincere and kind-hearted people are the most beautiful ones. After hard training, people will eventually get happiness, and generally the final outcome is that good will be rewarded, evil will be punished. Adults always try to educate their children through some stories.

Alice in Wonderland subverted the restrictions of traditional fairy tales by breaking its rigid didactic model by ingeniously integrating fantasy with the reality [4]. When Alice found a bottle in the underground world, she remembered that there were children who were burned by fire, eaten by wild animals or other unpleasant things because they refused to remember some simple rules. The moral preaching function of these traditional children's literature is obvious and has a deep impact on children.

However, Carroll exposes and satirizes the extreme preaching behavior of adults and their unfair treatment to children in *Alice in Wonderland*. When the mouse in the pool of tears gave up telling his long story and other small animals sighed, an old crab seized the opportunity to teach her daughter, "Ah, my dear! Let this be a lesson to you never to lose your temper!" [3] It turns out that her preaching was immediately refuted and questioned by her children, "Hold your tongue, Ma! 'You're enough to try the patience of an oyster!'" [3] The reality that adults lose no time preaching to children is vividly described. Alice's resistance is even stronger. She protested, "It's really dreadful" "the way all the creatures argue. It's enough to drive one crazy!" [2] More than once Alice fights against the authority and absurdity in the illusory world, and challenges the lessons and conventions that children must follow. All these show Lewis Carroll has sublated the moral preaching function of children's literature.

When Alice saw the Duchess for the first time, she found that she spoke fiercely. Alice finally summoned up the courage to talk to her about the strange thing that cats can laugh, but she was laughed at by the Duchess who thought she knew too few things. As a child, Alice received severe examination and ridicule from the Duchess as an adult. In addition, the Duchess, who lacked gentleness and patience, treated her children rudely, and ordered Alice to look after her children. At the Queen's croquet-ground, the Duchess put her sharp chin on Alice's shoulder, which made her very uncomfortable. Alice's body was also oppressed by adults. The Duchess, who is keen to seek moral in everything, seriously taught Alice: "Every thing's got a moral, if only you can find it." and finally summed up a moral: "'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!" [3] This allegory forms a huge contrast with all her previous behaviors. It creates a wonderful ironic tension. Consequently, Alice gently exposed her hypocritical words, "it's done by everybody minding their own business!" [3] Obviously Carroll shows the irony towards hypocrisy and moral preaching in the adult world. Carroll called fairy tales "the gift of love" [5] which highlighted the entertaining function of children's literature and subverted the purpose of moral preaching in traditional children's literature.

4. Advocating the Return of Child-centered Education

In the mid-19th century, it was very clear that the readers of fairy tales and folk tales were children, the preaching intention in the works gradually decreased, and the imagination developed and bloomed. But fantasy novels are still called "moral fantasy novels" [6]. With Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the status of children's fantasy novels has been further established. Children oriented literary creation has constructed a new fantasy world, demonstrated the infinite possibility of fantasy to readers, and created an epoch-making writing of children's fantasy novels.

Alice, who accidentally fell into the rabbit hole because of curiosity, experienced a series of absurd events, met all kinds of funny characters, encountered all kinds of inverted logic, and explored step by step by herself. She gradually achieved self-growth after experiencing the confusion and loss, the loneliness, resistance and growing up.

At first, when Alice came to the underground world, she felt strange and difficult to understand everything and everything went wrong, so she began to doubt her identity and ask herself questions, "Who am I? She tried to prove her identity by comparing with her peers, reciting multiplication tables, geographical knowledge and children's songs, but the result was frustrating. After that, her body experienced many times of getting bigger and smaller, and further encountered the question from the caterpillar "who are you? "Alice was further confused, "I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," "for I can't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing." [3]

Alice, who was lost and confused, felt out of place in the underground world. The Duchess scolded her, and the servants ignored her. The March Hare, the Hatter and the Dormouse didn't let her sit down for tea, although there were many places. They treated her rudely. The Mock Turtle and the Gryphon scolded her, and even the king wanted to drive her out of court, while the queen wanted to cut off her head. All this did not make the little girl flinch. In this absurd and chaotic underground world, Alice stumbled and found a mushroom that could control her body size. She began to have the courage to fight against all these and grew up in constant exploration. The climax appeared in the court. Alice loudly refuted the Queen's fallacy of "sentencing first, verdict afterwards", Facing the Queen's order to cut off her head, she responded angrily, "who cares for you?" "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" [3] Finally, Alice ended the unfair trial with her brave rebellion.

In Carroll's fairy tale world, the rules of adults seem chaotic, overbearing and unreasonable. Only by returning to the perspective of children and abandoning the prejudice that adults must be better than children, can we really enter the world of children. Children have their own unique internal values and the adult values shouldn't be imposed on them. Carroll focuses on children's aesthetics from their perspective. Just like Wordsworth's view on Children that children are the father of adults, Lewis Carrol also shows his view of respecting children's independence and rights and reflects his child-oriented view of education in *Alice in Wonderland*.

5. Conclusion

Alice in Wonderland vividly embodies the fantasy and imagination of children's literature with wonderful fantasy, strange stories and nonsense language. His works really enter the world of children and describe children's nature. No wonder they have been loved by children for a long time. In his works, he questions the authority of adults and defends for the children's rights. These show the author's irony and subversion to the traditional children's education in the Victorian period. His works has brought great pleasure to the children at that time and later. His view on children's education exerts great influence to modern writers and educators. As Virginia Woolf commented on him, "childhood was not dispersed in Dodgson as it usually is in adults, but remained in him entire, so he could do what no one else has ever been able to do-he could return to that world; he could recreate it."

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