

Towards a Politics of Food and Eating: From Class to Language in Wonderland

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Abstract

Food in classic literature is as much about the politics of food which is about housing and clothing, revealing the identity and status of characters. In Lewis Carroll's Alice series, food plays an important role in driving the plot of the novels, and by analyzing the relationship between food, class and language, the reader can see that society in Wonderland, like the Victorian reality, is characterized by serious and irreconcilable class antagonisms and conflicts.

Keywords

Alice Series; Eating; Class; Language; Politics.

1. Introduction

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *The World in the Mirror* (1871) (hereafter referred to as the 'Alice series') have become monuments of children's literature worldwide since their publication. Studies of the texts of the Alice series by scholars from both East and West have focused on translation, psychological and psychological analysis and biographies of the authors, but little has been done on the study of food. Food in literature, like housing and clothing, often suggests the identity and status of literary figures in terms of their eating habits and food choices, creating a distinctive food politics. In recent years some scholars have focused on the study of food imagery in texts, including food in relation to desire, gender and subjectivity and food in relation to the moral propriety of Victorian society, these works do not analyse the social nature of food in terms of its relationship to class and language. As a young girl from a middle- or upper-class family, Alice experiences class conflict in nineteenth-century English society as she travels down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, both in *Wonderland* and in the *Mirror World* (hereafter collectively referred to as *Wonderland*). To Alice and the reader, *Wonderland* seems absurd and chaotic compared to the Victorian reality, but if the food in this work is read in terms of both class and language, it is a mirror image that projects a more realistic and authentic Victorian social reality. What was Victorian social reality like? As Patrick Joyce tells us in *Work, Society and Politics: Corporate Culture in Late Victorian England*, the Victorian English countryside was not an idyllic landscape, as farmers were reduced to propertyless labor by the Enclosures Act and driven to work in Britain's hellish factories. In this land, labors were exploited by the capitalists, and poverty and decay made the English countryside into desert. Joyce also reveals the increasing political and judicial corruption caused by money.[3] In his essay *Social Class*, David Cody writes with outrage that an arbitrary, gated upper class "deprives not only the working class of its wealth but also the middle class of its voice". [2] It would appear that the rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation led to a serious ideological confrontation between the aristocracy and the working class.

2. Alice's Spell about Food and Class

At the beginning of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (hereafter Wonderland), once Alice falls down the rabbit hole, she says: "I know that whenever I want to eat or drink something funny must happen." [1] Throughout the Alice series, we find that Alice's words are like prophetic words that are always fulfilled. It seems that food plays an important role in the series. The history and symbolism of food and the preferences and choices made by the different characters construct the hierarchical society of the upper and lower classes in Wonderland, interpreting the Victorian socio-political and social power structures. Jams, plum cakes and syrups in Wonderland are the foods favored by the character figures of the upper classes; while the lower classes consume ordinary foods such as bread, and even things that are not considered food (tree sap, sawdust and shells, etc.). Of course, they have no choice but to swallow the food offered to them by a cruel and unjust society, even if it tastes unpalatable. From this we can infer a unique relationship between food and class in Wonderland, and between food and social identity.

Alice's body grows larger or smaller as a result of drinking and eating cake and mushrooms, which are symbolic of her personal experience of the relationship between food, identity and class. At the end of the first chapter of Wonderland, Alice eats a "very small cake with the words 'eat me' on it, words beautifully marked with sultanas". [1] In this way, food transforms Alice's body into a microcosm of Victorian society, with her head representing the upper class and her feet becoming the lower class, and Alice then assumes the characteristics of the upper class and begins to "sweet-talk" her feet, which symbolise the lower class. She also begins to worry about her ability to care for her feet, even as the distance between her head and feet grows. This relationship gives us a glimpse of the problems faced by the poor in British society, and the further her feet are from her head, the more difficult it is for the poor to solve their poverty. In order to keep her feet happy and obedient, Alice decides to "give them a new pair of boots every Christmas". [1] This scene in the work proves that a certain kind of food allows Alice herself to experience the differences between different social classes.

Alice in Wonderland has multiple experiences of becoming larger and smaller, which provides both a material and a social perspective on her upbringing to reflect on herself and society. It is worth reflecting on the fact that whenever Alice's body grows larger, she observes Wonderland from the perspective of the upper class. At this point, Alice is more physically powerful than the other animals in Wonderland; her distance from them (actual and symbolic) makes it difficult for her to understand the plight of the lower character figures, and so, like the Queen of Hearts in the story, she even abuses them. For example, when she becomes too big to go outside from eating mushrooms in the White Rabbit's house, she unceremoniously kicks Bill the Lizard out of the chimney and then threatens to release her cat Dinah to deal with the animals outside. [1] Of course, Alice's body shrinks as a result of consuming certain foods or drinking certain drinks, which allows her to see the beings of Wonderland from the perspective of the underclass. The smaller Alice's body gets, the closer she gets to the ground, the closer she gets to the underclass, and the weaker and more powerless she becomes like a member of the underclass. When Alice's body becomes smaller, she almost drowns in a pool of her own tears; when she runs out of the White Rabbit's house, all the animals that are larger than her "immediately surround her and attack her". [1] When she runs inside the woods, she even fears that she will be eaten by a small dog that is no danger to humans in the real world outside the rabbit hole. It is also when her body becomes smaller that the white rabbit mistakes Alice for the servant Mary Ann, as the social identity of the servant fits her smaller body exactly.

Alice realizes the reality of her reduced body in Wonderland: the low status, the lack of power, the crisis of her existence. As soon as she sees a small bottle standing next to the dressing mirror in the White Rabbit's house, "even though it didn't have any label on it like 'Drink me', Alice

pulled the cork off it and lifted it to her lips." She said to herself, "As soon as I eat or drink something, I'll see what this little bottle will do. I really hope it will make me tall again, because I'm fed up with being so small!" [1] Alice's reliance on the magic of food to change her body size and thus her social identity implies a direct relationship between food and social behavior, and even social identity. [1] Alice's social background and perception of identity in the real world conflict with her encounter in Wonderland, leaving her confused about "who I am". When the caterpillar on the mushroom asks her to reveal her identity, she is left speechless and has to argue, "Because I can't figure out how it all started, and it's so confusing that my height changes to a different size in one day." [1] Alice's encounter in Wonderland illustrates that food not only provides material nourishment for the body, but also reveals one's social status and social identity.

As a young girl of seven, she is unconcerned about her middle or upper class social status, which makes it difficult for her to recognize food as a symbol of social class. When she eats a small piece of mushroom, Alice becomes taller than a tree in Wonderland and she warns the pigeon, who accuses her of trying to steal the pigeon's eggs. The pigeon, a victim belonging to the lower class, fears and hates Alice because Alice's tall stature makes it believe that Alice is from the upper class and wants to plunder the fruits of its labor (the pigeon's eggs). [1] From the point of view of the conflicting lower and upper classes, a pigeon's egg holds a double meaning. For the pigeons, who represent the lower class, the act of eating the egg is a naked exploitation of the fruits of their labor; whereas the upper class takes the act of eating the egg, which exploits the fruits of the people's labor, for granted and acts consciously.

"I *have* tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say." [1]

The pigeon's statement completely strips away the beautiful lie that the upper classes have given to the act of egg-eating; in the pigeon's eyes, the little girls who eat eggs are no different from the notorious snakes in the grass. It is the cruelty of egg-eating itself that causes the outcry of the lower classes, and Alice cannot deny this social reality. At this point, feeling that her usual egg-eating behaviour is inappropriate, Alice realises, in the face of the pigeon's accusations, that the rich upper class treats the lower classes as viciously as the snake, and is momentarily speechless, so she keeps her mouth shut and all she can do is to "be silent for a minute or two". [1] After several rounds of confrontation with the white rabbit and the dove, Alice comes to understand that the 'sweet' life she used to have in the real world came from the sacrifices and contributions of the lower classes, and that she understands the plight of the lower classes. It is only when she leaves her real world and enters the fantasy world of Wonderland that this social truth emerges and becomes clear to her, for in the real world, where lies abound, the truth is always hidden. In the chapter "Mad Tea Party" of Wonderland, Sleeping Mouse tells Alice, the Hatter and the March Hare a story about three little girls who live at the bottom of a well. During the story, Alice asks, "What do they do for a living?" "This is not new to readers of the Alice series, as she is "always interested in food and drink". [1] In the third chapter of *The Mirror World*, when a flying insect, also from the lower classes, mentions the Christmas dragonfly to her, she asks the same question, "What does it live on?" [1] This question immediately connects food with class, the poor caring about having enough to eat and the rich not caring about what to eat, or not caring, in general, "what one lives on" has a double meaning: it is both the nutrient necessary to sustain one's vital functions and the work or It is also a job or a wage.

Thus, not only does the question link certain types of food to classes of consumption, but the differences in the sweetness and eating quality of different foods also indicate different affiliations between food and class. The lowly characters in the *Mirror of Wonder* can only eat things that are not palatable, or even considered food, such as the rocking horse fly in *Insects in the Mirror*, which feeds on “tree sap and sawdust”, and the prison seafarer in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, who is a member of the prison community. In “*The Lion and the Unicorn*”, Hatta in prison can only eat oyster shells, so he is thirsty and hungry, but as soon as he becomes the king's messenger, he can “take a cup of tea in one hand and a piece of buttered bread in the other”; and when the king is dizzy, he orders the messenger to “give me a ham sandwich!” The messenger opened the pocket around his neck, took a sandwich and gave it to the king, who immediately devoured it greedily. [1]

The analysis of the food on which the “insects in the mirror” feed further demonstrates the importance of Alice's question to the search for social truth. For example, the food of the bread and butterfly hints at the inequality between rich and poor in the real world. The flying insects tell Alice that the butterfly depends on “butterscotch” to survive.

A new difficulty came into Alice's head. ‘Supposing it couldn't find any?’ she suggested.

‘Then it would die, of course.’

‘But that must happen very often,’ Alice remarked thoughtfully.

‘It always happens,’ said the Gnat. [1]

In fact, for the butterfly, “bread-and-butter” is both food and poison, because its head is a cube of sugar, and as soon as it eats the food, its head is dipped and dissolved into the “bread-and-butter”. Like Bill's lizard, which was kicked out of the chimney, the butterfly is associated with Alice's foot, suggesting its lowly status: “A butterfly is crawling on your foot!” The flying insect says, and Alice is startled and hurries to retract her foot.[1] These animals are lowly because of their poverty, or because they are lowly, and their misfortune is in fact the very injustice suffered by the lower classes of the real world.

The flying insect's words seem so harsh to Alice in the mirror world, and they cause the values she has constructed in the real world to completely collapse. In the real world, Alice is accustomed to admiring butterflies, which flutter in a serene and elegant way; in the mirror world, the butterflies have lost their magnificent colors and ornaments and have become “bread and butterflies” crawling on Alice's feet. The flying insect is in deep grief, telling Alice in a “very small voice” about the butterfly's misfortune, and it must be afraid of telling the truth, for if it were to break the sweet illusion of the mirror world, it would be met with revenge from the creator of this illusion. The butterfly's antithesis is the bread-and-butter butterfly.

The antithesis of the bread-and-butter butterfly is the Christmas dragonfly, “whose body is made of plum cake, whose wings are made of leaves of Christmas fruit, and whose head is a sultana lit with brandy.” It survives by “eating milk cereal and minced meat pies”. [1] The Christmas dragonfly derives from a Christmas game popular in England, Canada and the United States in the 16th century. The game was also played on Halloween. The players would pour brandy into a shallow bowl, which would be filled with sultanas, and other dried and preserved fruits would also be used. The sultanas are then lit and a special game song is sung, with the participants quickly grabbing and eating the sultanas and dried fruit out of the blue flames of the brandy as the song is sung, often with the food still on fire. To create atmosphere, participants would also extinguish other sources of fire, leaving only the ghostly blue brandy flame. The upper and middle classes enjoyed this game, at this time because the elaborately decorated drawing room contained brandy, plum cake and sultanas for guests to enjoy,

suggesting that the image of the Christmas dragonfly created by Carroll belonged to the upper or middle class.

3. Jam Rules about Food and Language

Food is also a metaphor for language. The upper classes in the *Mirror of Wonder* use figurative language, including abstract concepts and beautiful words, to conceal hidden social injustices or harsh realities. In this way, their food becomes a mask for a false “good society”, used to pacify the lower classes and eliminate social conflict. As food for the upper classes, “plum” appears nine times in *The World in the Mirror*, “jam” eight times and “egg” nine times. “Plum” also means “one hundred thousand pounds” or “one who has this wealth” in OED online (The Oxford English Dictionary), July 2018. It thus implies a certain amount of money and thus becomes a sign of high society. Although modern English uses the second meaning of “plum” as “a coveted prize” or “anything desirable” in OED, its third definition as an adjective “The third definition is rarer, “when someone talks in an ambiguous or contrived way, saying that someone's mouth is full of plums This indicates the speech patterns of the British upper classes” in OED. The third definition of “plum” shows the leap from food to class to language, a fruit only available to the upper classes, to a pretentious mode of speech for the upper classes. The plum, which only the upper classes can afford to buy, finally becomes a marker that distinguishes them from the lower classes, and their “plum-like” way of speaking becomes synonymous with artifice and pomposity.

In Chapter 5 of *The Mirror*, the upper-class White Queen wishes to appease Alice with sweetmeats or sweet words so that Alice can serve her. She asks Alice to be her maid, baiting her with a daily dose of jam, “that's good jam yet”. However, the deceitful nature of the upper class is then revealed, “I make the rule that tomorrow there is jam, yesterday there was jam, but today there will never be jam”. [1] A second definition of “jam” is “something good or sweet, especially when used to suggest the use of sweets to mask the unpleasant taste of drugs something that is promised or expected in the future, especially something that will never be obtained” according to OED online. Accordingly, the author proposes the “jam rule”, which is threefold: 1. The upper classes are good at and need to use “jam-like” food because they have control over sweet foods such as “jam”, which are difficult for the lower classes to access. 2. People's choice of food is a direct response to social reality, and for the upper classes to eat sweet foods such as jam in public is both a desecration of upper class etiquette and a metaphor for the destruction of upper class linguistic characteristics such as subtlety and introversion. 3. The conflict between jam and language of the relationship with harmony applies to the relationship between food and language within different classes. Thus, once the upper classes find themselves acting and speaking in an unseemly manner, breaking the “jam rule” and revealing their greedy faces beneath the formerly gentle veil of language, they are bound to take action, for example, when Alice's cat Dinah cleans her face of rat-hunting and rat-eating to hide her carnivorous nature. [1]

The White Queen expects that the sweet taste of the jam she promises will mask the 'unpleasant taste' of Alice's social status as a maid, but the taste of the jam is an illusion, so Alice complains to the White Queen: “I can't understand it, it's just baffling.” [1] Alice, who in the real world belongs to the middle and upper classes, becomes the maid of the White Queen in the mirror world and suddenly becomes frustrated and “horribly” confused when she herself becomes the “target” of the figurative language of the upper classes. Faced with the conflict between two kinds of jams: the “sweet jam” of figurative language, in which she excels, and the illusory “sweet jam” promised by the White Queen -- Alice grows increasingly concerned about the stability of her social position in the *Mirror of Wonder*.

The White Queen then sells Alice an egg, proving once again that the “jam rule” is prevalent in the upper classes. By this time the White Queen has become a sheep and the owner of a small shop. Alice buys an egg from the sheep, but the sheep says: “I never put anything in people's hands and I never will, you have to get it yourself.” Alice immediately noticed, “It seemed that the more I went towards it, the further away from me that egg got.”[1] Since Alice in the mirror world is only the maid of the White Queen and does not belong to the upper class who can eat “eggs”, eating the egg becomes an impossible task for Alice. The English phrase “egg on” means “to incite; to encourage”, and it is from this meaning that the egg lures Alice to chase it in OED online, July 2018.

Ironically, the literal meaning of “egg on” leads to the egg-shaped man (Humpty Dumpty) sitting high up on a narrow wall. The egg Alice bought from the shop becomes the “egg-shaped man” in the English nursery rhyme of “Humpty Dumpty”. The Egg-shaped Man's linguistic claim is: “I use a word that is always exactly what I want to say, neither too heavy nor too light.” He gives “words orders to obey you, and they must do it well”, reflecting the way in which language becomes a convenient tool for the upper classes to paint society with 'sweet' language and hide the reality of misery.[1] The egg-shaped man confidently believes that he can manipulate all verbs and adjectives at will, but he ignores the potential crisis inherent in his position - the possibility of falling over the narrow wall and being pulverized at any moment.

The law of jam also seems to apply on the rare occasions when the lower animals in Wonderland may have the opportunity to eat the sweets that represent the upper classes, a limited compensation for the hard work of the lower classes by the upper classes to mitigate the intensification of class conflict. In the third chapter of Wonderland, “*A Parliamentary Race and a Long Story*”, the dodo demands that Alice must award prizes to all the animals. Alice is forced to be the prize giver, so that she has to prepare the prizes herself, and Alice becomes an upper-class person with the responsibility of calming the noisy animals. She happened to have a box of sweets and distributed them to all the animals who had entered. Candy is “a sweetmeat made of certain fruits, roots, etc., preserved in sugar; now usually a small round or oval sugar snap, covered with almonds, etc.” in OED online. The similarity in pronunciation between the English word “comfit” and the word “comfort” means that the little creatures literally receive not only the sweets, but also the comforting words from Alice.

Just as the White Queen asks Alice to be her maid in exchange for jam, the distribution of sweets has a clear economic dimension. The title of the chapter suggests that the “*parliamentary race*” dictates that the race is run in a completely arbitrary manner, with all the animals running from different positions along the race route, and that they “start with whoever wants to start and stop with whoever wants to stop”. [1] Carroll positions the dodo as a sort of bureaucratic figure who decides when the race ends rather than where it ends, while the other different figurative characters represent the lower classes of different professions. These candy or soothing words are meant to appease the lower classes who struggle like animals in a competitive Victorian economy and encourage them to turn a blind eye to the arbitrary and subjective ways in which the “race” is run.

However, Alice is only a young girl, new to Wonderland and not yet able to use her education and language to respond to the questioning from the animals. When the Dodo asks her to award a prize, she “really didn't know what to do, so she reached into her coat pocket and, hey! took out a box of sweets”. [1] When the birds and small animals try to eat the sweets, instead of being comforted and tasty, they create “a ruckus, with the big birds complaining that the sweets are gone before they can taste them, and the little birds choking on them and having to be patted on the back”. [1] The noise and complaints can be interpreted as the birds' inability to digest the suffocating sweetness and their barely comprehensible protest against Alice's naive, figurative language.

There is a particular scene in the March Hare's "Mad Tea Party", a challenge to the laws of jam. Sleeping Mouse tells the story of three little girls who live at the bottom of a "molasses well" and survive on the molasses inside. Molasses is the uncrystallised sugar juice produced in the process of refining sugar; sometimes it extends to the uncrystallised sugar juice derived from crude sugar, and is used more figuratively as "a fleshy, sweet sounding word, especially one of contrived praise, flattery" in OED online, syrup metaphorically conceals the truth of the suffering of the lower classes with false and deceptively sweet words from the upper classes. Alice is skeptical of girls surviving on syrup alone, replying, "They can't do that, you know they get sick." [1] As Alice affirms, syrup is an artificial product and consuming only syrup will only make a person "sick". While the 'sweetness' of syrup only makes reality 'look pretty', a syrup-eating lifestyle can hardly exist in the real world. Indeed, the story of the Sleeping Mouse suggests that the metaphorical language represented by the syrup removes the narrator (the Sleeping Mouse) and the syrup-eaters from the real world - the three sisters are completely dependent on the overly sweet syrup and live alone at the bottom of the well, isolated from the world.

The Hatter and the March Hare, as a skilled artisanal class, have a slightly higher status than the poor at the bottom. In their case, the conflict between conventional and figurative language is particularly striking, and the contradiction between food and drink becomes more pronounced. At the "mad tea party" at the March Hare's house, the hatter deplors the fact that his watch has broken. The hatter then scolds him for adding butter to the watch with a bread knife, causing the crumbs to fall in as well. The March Hare and the Hatter tell Alice about their quarrel with time and how it "wouldn't do what I wanted any more, it always stopped at six o'clock". "Butter up" means "to please, to flatter", and the hatter and the March Hare, a crazy pair, want to please Time in the metaphorical sense of butter, to get back into Time's favour and to ease the conflict, so the March Hare adds to Time's physical presence -- watch by adding real butter to it. They use the physical properties of butter to "please" time, i.e. to express it literally in a straightforward way in order to achieve a metaphorical expression, which is impossible. This is a sign that, as an artisanal class, they find it difficult, if not impossible, to use figurative language properly. Their awkward status -- as artisans who may have wealth comparable to that of the middle and upper classes, but see the world through the eyes of the lower classes - leads to confusion and conflict within the Hatter and the March Hare, so using the Cheshire Cat to tell Alice that "The Hatter ... March Hare can visit whoever you like, they're both mad." As craftsmen, they are not only unable to alleviate the conflict between the upper and lower classes, but also face the unavoidable social conflict between these two classes.

4. Conclusion

Alice in Wonderland, like a real girl, is easily intrigued by food and drink like toys. The food not only makes her bigger and smaller, thus enabling her to perceive the world of Wonderland in a new light; at the same time, through her "encounters" with different food in different scenes, she hears the "discordant" voices of the lower classes in Wonderland and the hypocritical and pretentious language of the upper classes. This allows her to see the real social differences in Wonderland, to understand the reality of the conflict between the different classes in it, and even to have her perception of her own identity turned upside down and torn apart.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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