WONDERLAND AND *THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS*. THE MIRRORING OF VICTORIAN SOCIETY, CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WORLD OF FICTION

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Abstract: Literature is a means of transmitting social and ethical values, even if the authorchooses to do so by creating a parody of the world he chooses, or is obligedindirectly, subconsciously, to mirror. The two worlds created by Lewis Carroll in hisAlice adventures are used, although the author does not specifically stress this, toreveal the truth (or "his" truth) about Victorian society, more exactly about thedestiny of children and future adult women in a world dominated by rigid rules, roles and a suffocating sense of morality.

Keywords: Victorianism, femininity, parody, fantasy, authority

Despite the fact that art had been considered to be a mere imitation of reality, based on the concept of *mimesis*, for a long time, starting mostly with the 19th century, that brought a new definition of fantasy, the relationship between the two has been a topic of debate, which triggered many changes (Doležel, 1998:39). As a consequence of the possible-worlds theory formulated by Leibniz followed by the literary ones introduced by Breitinger, Bodmer and Baumgarten (Doležel, 1998:44-49), fantasy is broadly seen nowadays as having its own place, one located in a parallel dimension to reality, but which is strongly linked to the latter, which becomes its source of 'inspiration' (Jackson, 1981:21). And the eccentric, unusual, surprising worlds created by the British author Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871) are no exception, elements that mirror the Victorian culture and society being present throughout Alice's initiation in the world of the 'well-bred' middle and upper-class adults. By the use of irony, parody, humour and nonsense, Carroll shows not necessarily the negative aspects of British society, family life, rules and principles, but the darker corners, the ones that have been hidden from the public eye in the struggle to portray an ideal way of living. And he does so by reflecting this world through the innocent eyes of the child, and not any child, but a young lady. The reason behind Carroll's choice has raised numerous questions, starting from some related to pedophilia (which were also determined by his relationship with children in real life) to the idea that he was extremely preoccupied by the changed that society forced little girls to go through as they grew up. The first reason for his choice lays in the fact that Carroll created the story as he was having tea one summer afternoon with Alice Liddell, with whom he had a very affectionate relationship, her sisters and his friend, Robinson Duckworth. Furthermore, the British author was much more relaxed in the company of little girls in general, possibly due to his sensitivity, shyness and effeminate personality, which made him stutter and give up playfulness and humour mostly when he was around boys and men (Carpenter & Prichard, 1999:98). It is precisely his nature that may have allowed him to access more easily the inner world of children and, more precisely, of little girls and to try to subvert the real world which he saw as trying to spoil their desire for adventure and freedom, curiosity and imagination.

In the process of subverting reality through the fantastic worlds created, Carroll also focuses on the way femininity is defined in Victorianism. In this period, the feminine ideal is defined as being closely related to motherhood, family and the home, the woman's main roles representing her as a loving, caring and pure being, 'an angel' of the house. Inside the haven that is the home she has many responsibilities, all of them related to taking care of the family and her husband's fortune, making sure that everything has its right place, including the servants, and is well organized: "the whole of the internal administration is in her hands – she has the management of the children and of servants, she can make her husband's home happy or miserable, she can increase his estate by the management and frugality, or she can reduce him to beggary by her willfulness or extravagance." (Mitchell in Langland, 1995:46) But when put into contrast with the male figure, she is seen as being submissive and passive, with no other interest than being a good wife (and mother). Besides these qualities, respectful Victorian women are seen as the embodiment of virtue and morality, the desire of the flesh having nothing to do not even with their most intimate thoughts. As a consequence, they are seen as "the image of a contemporary Virgin Mary - dedicated to the Christian principles, sensitive, kind, fragile" (Sâncelean, 2012:10), who could never wrong or disappoint their loved ones and, most of all, society. Of course, when considering all these characteristics, the reference point are the women from the middle and higher classes, as they were considered to be the ones respecting the etiquette, while the ones belonging to the working class, the less educated and wealthy ones (since the two were seen as going hand in hand), were disregarded and perceived as less virtuous and as being more like "females", than "ladies". This idea is obviously related to sexuality and sensuality, the relationship between these and the ideal mother and wife being seen as an oxymoronic one. It is a 'flaw' that Carroll detects in the Victorian society and mirrors in his first *Alice* book, in an exaggerated manner, when the heroine meets the Pigeon, the image of the ideal Victorian woman and who become hysterical when she mistakes Alice as a serpent, a possible threat from what is a symbol of eroticism (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Vol.III, 1994:308).

The situations of mistaken identities that Alice goes through are not few, as both in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* she gets extremely confused when other characters take her as somebody else. These situations, along with others, are used by the authors as warnings for Alice, their purpose being to help the heroine become aware of the 'dangers' that lie behind social morality and the structures it triggers. John Goldthwaite in his book *The Natural History of Make-Believe: A Guide to the Principal Works of Britain, Europe, and America* analyzes some of these episodes in the first *Alice* book, where he identifies five of them that stretch from the chapter *The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill* to *The Queen's Croquet-Ground* (1996:127), along with the ones present in *Femininity between Fantasy and Reality: Escaping to Wonderland*, by Sâncelean Andreea (2012:60-64).

The first warning that Carroll inserts is related to the prize Alice receives from the Dodo after participating at the Caucus Race – a thimble. Although it might seem an arbitrary object that Alice herself finds by mistake in her pocket, the thimble carries a very strong message – as a future wife and mother, the heroine is very likely to be put in the situation to spend her days by simply performing her duties in the house, without any sign of spontaneity or adventure. This episode is strongly related to the one in which the White Rabbit mistakes

Alice for his maid, sending her to fetch his gloves, which comes to reinforce the very possible roles the heroine will have to take over in her adult life. These two episodes work only as a prelude to the one in which Alice meets the embodiment (an exaggerated one, as Carroll uses parody and irony throughout his books) of the Victorian ideal when it comes to femininity – the Pigeon. After making her nest "in the highest tree in the wood", she is horrified at the sight of an immense creature that is Alice, that she mistakes for a serpent. The contradiction between the two beings is evident: the Pigeon, symbol of purity and peace, but also of the Victorian mother who is blinded by her duty to protect her offspring, thus becoming irrational and hysterical, would do anything to get rid of the female serpent that threatens her and her family's integrity, not only from physically, but also morally, as the snake is the symbol of sexuality and eroticism, not only of evil (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, Vol.III, 1994:308):

> 'As if it wasn't trouble enough hatching eggs,' said the Pigeon; 'but I must be on the look-out for serpents, night and day! Why, I haven't had a wink of sleep these three weeks! (…) And just as I'd taken the highest tree in the wood,' continued the Pigeon, raising its voice to a shriek, ' and just as I was thinking I should be free of them at last, they must needs come wriggling down from the sky! Ugh, Serpent!'
>
> (Carroll, 1998:47-48)

Following the encounter with the over-protective mother, Alice is given the chance to meet a few anti-models through characters like the Duchess, her Cook and the Queen of Hearts. While the Pigeon's only purpose seems to be behaving as a good mother, the Duchess is her exact opposite, shocking Alice this time with her carelessness and aggressive behaviour. Unlike the Pigeon, she does not care at all for the well-being of the child she has in her care; on the contrary – she seems to loathe him from the bottom of her heart, this being obvious when reading the lyrics of the lullaby she sings while rocking the baby violently:

> '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, 1998:54-55)

Because of the Duchess's lack of sensibility and interest in her responsibilities related to the home and family, that she clearly despises, the kitchen itself, where Alice finds her together with the baby and the Cook (who is as crazy and violent as the head of the household), is a chaotic and noisy place, resembling a battlefield where kitchen items, food and pepper fly around accompanying words and gestures that are strikingly grotesque. It is no wonder why, after rescuing the baby boy from the Duchess's kitchen, Alice realizes that he soon transforms into a pig.

In the same register, there is also the Queen of Hearts – the authoritarian woman, with absurd rules and punishments, who seems to enjoy beheading anyone who dares to contradict

or upset her in any way. The Queen is so abusive that she sentences everyone to death during the game of croquet, except the King and Alice, the latter managing to avoid this by being as courteous as possible and keeping her temper. Her encounter with the Queen of Hearts proves to be one of the most challenging for the heroine, as this tyrannical character seems to be the peak of the anomalies social rules and limitations may create in the fantasy world – she is "the grotesque representation [of the] Victorian feminine principle in its complexity, becoming a nightmare of hysteria, tyranny, and nonsense for little girls as they look up to what is going to come of them when they grow up." (Sâncelean, 2012:64)

Alice goes through similar frustrating experiences in the second *Alice* book, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, where she meets two queens – the Red and the White Queen. The two are not as aggressive as the Queen of Hearts, but whenever she is in their company, the heroine feels either irritated, or extremely bored and fed up with their absurdities and nonsense, the two characters working not only as representations of femininity, but also of authority that seems to have to purpose in both of Carroll's worlds.

The concept of authority proves to be one difficult to digest for the author, who tries to subvert it throughout the two books. He perceives it as a fault of Victorian society, but it is one that can be found in almost all kinds of societies – the 'instinct' of obeying figures of authority without even questioning them. Carroll's attitude towards authority is visible when the Cheshire Cat refuses to kiss the King's hand as it is accustomed, this triggering the latter's furious order to behead the Cat, thing that proves to be impossible since it refuses to show its body (Sâncelean, 2012:47). This character, who proves to be Alice's only friend in Wonderland, is none other than the author himself, who chooses to show his deepest and most authentic opinions towards authority not in the real world, but in the one belonging to fantasy.

Carroll's attitude in this matter can also be identified in the way he treats aspects of life that are usually taken very seriously in reality, like the trial and the dinner Alice participates to, along with other authorities of the two worlds – the Kings and Queens. The satirical representation of the trial spreads along two chapters in the first *Alice* book – *Who Stole the Tarts?* and *Alice's Evidence*. What is a concept treated with the utmost seriousness and responsibility in the real world, has its rules turned upside down and even abolished in Carroll's narrative. The jurors are "creatures", that write their names on plates at the beginning of the trial so as not to forget them until its end; also, the notes that they take during the trial do not respect the witnesses' declarations, giving the impression that they do not have a very clear idea about what their responsibilities are. The same impression is given by the King, who, after hearing the accusation wants to give the verdict without listening to the witnesses, whose declarations seem to have almost nothing in common with the cause that is being judged. Furthermore, Alice herself, who knows nothing about the stolen tarts, is called as a witness, but is later asked to leave the court as she is too tall. Despite all these peculiarities, the heroine seems to be the only one who realizes that the procedure of the trial is not going the way it should, although she is just a child who has never been in a court before. But the fact that Carroll gives the child more credit than the adults is a tendency that is observed throughout the two books, as the author "took the child's side and showed the grown-ups to be an uncivil lot, making and breaking the rules to suit themselves while holding Alice to a standard of courtesy and grace." (Goldthwaite, 1996:127)

The same characteristics are to be found in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* after Alice becomes queen and is obliged to give a dinner-party to celebrate her new title, a moment defined by chaos and lack of manners, both Queens and the other guests' behaviour determining the heroine to compare them with "pigs in a trough" (Carroll, 1998:198). Exasperated by the grotesque and lack of common-sense she witnesses in both books, Alice decides to end both the trial and the dinner-party by giving up etiquette and politeness, then confronting authority and turning against it.

Besides criticizing the figures of authority, which he portrays as masks that may hide shallowness and profound flaws, Carroll also satirizes Victorian etiquette, which is so highly valued by the middle and upper-class of his time. He does so mostly by the contrast created between Alice and most of the characters she meets, who expect the heroine to show them respect and obedience, while they keep interrupting and contradicting her, and, ultimately, having a very insulting attitude. The episode which perfectly represents Victorian society and the contradiction between the image it tends to create about itself and its true 'identity' is the one in which Alice meets the flowers from the Looking-Glass World. These seem to be so preoccupied with appearances that they misjudge Alice, who is, after all, human, and try to diminish her value based on what she looks like:

> 'It isn't manners for us to begin, you know,' said the Rose, 'and I really was wondering when you'd speak! Said I to myself, "Her face has got some sense in it, thought it's not a clever one!" Still, you're the right colour, and that goes a long way.' 'I don't care about the colour,' the Tiger-lily remarked. 'If only her petals curled up a little more, she'd be all right.' (Carroll, 1998:95)

But the British author also 'attacks' etiquette and the standard Victorian education in a more subtle manner than his parodies of different typologies through the characters he creates and real-life situations – he does this by subverting well-known and very cherished children's poems of this period, which were used by adults for didactic purposes. Carroll recreates these, emptying them of their main purpose and transforming them into playful, humourous reading experiences that are "are all rebellious in exactly the way that children are rebellious." (Nilsen, 1998:246) Consequently, poems like "How Doth the Little Busy Bee", "Tis the Voice of the Sluggard", "The Star", "The Old Man's Comforts" and "Will You Walk Into My Parlour? Said the Spider to the Fly" become "How Doth the Little Crocodile", "Tis the Voice of the Lobster", "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat!", "You Are Old, Father William", and "The Lobster Quadrille" (Nilsen, 1998:246, Carpenter & Prichard, 1999:17), which, "instead of filling their heads with lessons of obedience, hard-work, respect, and humbleness, […] have a single purpose—the one of entertaining children and showing them a good time." (Sâncelean, 2012:69).

Through his *Alice* books, Lewis Carroll recreates reality, by subverting the rigid rules and limitations imposed by Victorian society, shedding a light on its obscure corners, hidden behind respectability and morality. The heroine that ventures in the fantasy worlds is given the chance to reinforce her inner self after going through difficult experiences and even a profound identity crisis and to see a glimpse of 'truth' in the mirrored image of Victorian principles, values and way of living.

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