MASTERING THE RULES: A NEW STRATEGY OF SUBVERTING AUTHORITY. THE CASE OF LEWIS CARROLL'S *ALICES*

Cătălina BĂLINIŞTEANU, Assistant, PhD, "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău

Abstract: Starting from Northrop Frye's idea that "all respect for the law is a product of the social imagination, and the social imagination is what literature directly addresses. . . ."[1] we want to show that certain texts confirm/reaffirm to readers that the social order and its rules or laws work or should work. Any failure in their implementation reflects a flaw of the social system, and at the same time Alice's expectations regarding her status as a new woman. Our paper deals on the one hand with the education in Victorian England whose goal is to mould children into young Christian gentlemen/ladies and on the other hand with the child's attempts at subverting adults' authority. The rejection of Victorian manners and education is revealed through satirical presentation of maxims and morals about obedience, thus the Victorian upbringing is presented as nonsensical when Alice aims at learning and mastering the rules of the 'game' in both Wonderland and the Looking Glass.

Keywords: authority, recognition, order vs. disorder, absurdity, Victorian education

Children's literature approaches as a main theme the power relationships established by a particular society which are further transmitted to the new generation. Fairy tales are among the first examples which provide the readers with the necessary information about the parents' power over their heirs, about the parents' authority over their children in all conditions and social strata. These works often present the parental brutal and dominating way of educating and disciplining the child into adopting and submitting himself to social norms and conventions. One topic depicted in Lewis Carroll's books refers to the public school and to the teachers' authority, in which he criticizes the educational system and its intimidating methods. Both Mary Liston and Colin Manlove[2] discuss in their works the explicit critique on the teachers' authority and on the power of educational institutions found in the narratives which dealt with the Victorian public school. The use of nonsense generally signals a critique of society, of politics, of rules, because it indicates the contrast with these conventions. Nonsense should not be understood as accidental or random deviance from reason, it should be perceived more as subversion rather than the destruction of meaning.

In the 19th century parents, teachers or other officials who might get into contact with children often misuse their authority and unjustly treat the pupils. The child is never presented as a subject free from rules or free from social norms; the child has always been involved in the social system, it has always had to pay attention to the relationships, the limitations and morals of the world it lives in. In the narratives having children as main characters, these struggle to elude or to confront the adults as skilfully as they can. Since the publication of

[1] Northrop Frye, "Literature and Law" in *Law Society of Upper Canada Gazette 70,* 1970.
[2] Colin Manlove, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*, Cybereditions, Christchurch, 2003, pp. 185-6; Mary Liston, "The Rule of Law through the Looking Glass" in *Law and Literature*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 2009, University of California Press, p. 43.

BDD-V558 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:52:18 UTC)

Lewis Carroll's *Alices,* people have left behind the old didactics and have proved flexibility regarding the child's creativity, although the world is still being ordered – both morally and hierarchically[3]. The legal and political restraints are meant to assure the recognition of order over disorder and to reduce chaos and the essential goals of laws/rules are order and stability. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the law is understood only as a set of rules for a game, which cannot be preserved in a regime with an absolute sovereignty.

In each book Alice leaves her middle-class Victorian world in order to embrace the adventures from Wonderland and the Looking Glass, two strange worlds where the normal rules do not apply. In these new worlds, Alice discovers that the laws are in fact some rules taken from the game of chess, the ones acknowledged in a battle, or the ones prescribed by the etiquette, all operating within one system meant to emphasize the concept of absolute sovereignty. Within this absurd system, Alice comes across different types of authoritarian figures who behave childishly, selfishly, irresponsibly, and most of the time madly. Madness, here, does not necessarily indicate insanity, but rather anger or eccentricity. Wonderland seems to be an upside down version of reality, of its legal system. Alice does not feel alienated in this world, because she is not a typical Victorian child, hence her courage to speak freely without being asked. Her assertion and confidence are remarked in her speech: when the Red Queen admonishes her "Speak when you're spoken to!" Alice replies: "But if everybody obeyed that rule . . . and if you only spoke when you were spoken to, and the other person always waited for *you* to begin, you see nobody would ever say anything. . . ." (p. 251). Alice's goal in both books is represented through her desire to learn and to master the rules in order to know how to play that 'game' from Wonderland or from the Looking Glass.

On the one hand, Wonderland proves to be a model of authority, where most of the remarks take the form of commands and where the authority figures expect obedience and compliance from their subjects. Each of these figures believes about himself/ herself to be the absolute sovereign, but in the end Alice defies their power by minimizing their authority and reaffirming their position as mere pawn in a game. On the other hand, Wonderland is portrayed through anarchy due to the instability of characters, of spatial borders, of concepts. The Looking Glass presents a different perspective on authority, since all its inhabitants are forced to comply with the authoritative rules of a game of chess, rules that they did not create or that they could never change.

The subversion of authority from the real world is exhibited in the game of croquet which Alice is forced to play. This game can lack order and fairness due to its changeable rules and to its bad structure. The mixture of cards (taking up the roles of hoops), flamingos (as mallets) and hedgehogs (as balls) creates various problems since these parts of the game are all 'living', each having their own identity and selfish interests, thus making the game ineffective. The lack of order is enhanced not only by the participants in the game, but also by everybody's tendency of running around, by everybody's reduced interest of actually playing that game, by the continuous danger of death penalty shouted by the queen: "The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping

[3] John Morrison, "Stories for Good Children" in *Tall Stories? Reading Law and Literature*, ed. John Morrison and Christine Bell, Aldershot, UK, Dartmouth, 1996.

BDD-V558 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:52:18 UTC)

about, and shouting "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once in a minute" (p. 85). The inconstancy of the game of croquet is also revealed when nobody seems indignant with having flamingos as mallets, when severe punishments are applied for minor errors, when rules are applied retroactively without paying attention to the present game. The chaotic atmosphere is further maintained when none of the Red Queen's threats and punishments is ever enforced, everyone knows that the threat of beheading is just an idle talk, as the Gryphon confesses to Alice: "It's all her fancy, that: they never executes nobody, you know. . . ." (p. 95).

The Red Queen's capricious and authoritarian behaviour is incongruous with her position; therefore, she is not able to implement a legal system which will work efficiently. The retrospective character of the rules reminds the readers of Franz Kafka's work, when his heroes are punished for something they do not know of or forgot of having committed, thus the absurdity of implementing this legal system. Alice keeps on thinking like a usual child, being willing to learn the laws/rules as she is only interested in winning the game of chess or croquet. Both Carroll and Kafka are interested in exhibiting the readers the absurdity of the laws/ rules, since the goal of a legal system is not to 'win', but to impose morality in the actual behaviour of human beings[4]. The Red Queen's absolute sovereignty in Wonderland suggests the ineffectiveness of her authority as well as the anarchic tendencies of the political 'order'. Joseph Zornado suggests that the Red Queen is an attack of the notion of 'motherly' love, since her threats are as capricious and terrifying as the adults' power over the child: "Anything can happen at any time, and it is at the pleasure of the adult to determine right from wrong, up from down, and any other rules of any other game in order to preserve and the defend the status quo"[5].

Each conversation between Alice and the inhabitants of Wonderland produce confusion (because she is often misdirected, her questions are answered evasively or she simply misinterprets the signs) and anger (Alice is often insulted or regarded with disdain by these imaginary creatures). Each conversation includes commands ("Everybody says 'come on!' here," thought Alice . . . "I never was so ordered about before, in all my life, never!" – p. 95), or instructions ("Drink me." "Eat me") or directions (the episode with the caterpillar) or orders ("Off with their heads!"). When this level is overcome, the discourse continues with riddles and puns which question the characters' authority and prove their incapacity of playing a pivotal role. What we notice from the conversation with Humpty Dumpty is the interest in the form of communication rather than on the depth of topics: the conversation starts with a series of insults, but it later improves. Humpty Dumpty's interest in the verbal exchange makes him an authority in language, in defining the meaning of words. Alice and the readers find out that language has a power of its own, and words do not function as passive objects utilized by the speaker[6]. The one that masters best the words can be called an authority in this domain, hence the game of words between Alice and Humpty Dumpty.

[4] Mary Liston, "The Rule of Law through the Looking Glass" in *Law and Literature*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 2009, University of California Press, p. 49.
[5] Joseph L. Zornado, *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood*, New York, Garland, 2001, p. 116.
[6] W. H. Auden wrote: "In both worlds, one of the most important and powerful characters is not a person but the English language. Alice, who had hitherto supposed that words were passive objects, discovers that they have a life and will of their own." (W. H. Auden, "Today's 'Wonder-World' Needs Alice," in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis*

BDD-V558 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:52:18 UTC)

Gaining identity seems to be part of this game, with Alice facing the question "Who are you?" (p. 47) several times and making great effort to find her identity and recognition in Wonderland. At the beginning of her journey through the Looking Glass, she seems to reject her identity of a human being coming from reality and to embrace the identity particular to the creatures from the fantasy worlds: "It's a great huge game of chess that's being played—all over the world—if this *is* the world at all, you know. Oh, what fun it is! How I *wish* I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join—though of course I should *like* to be a Queen, best." (p. 163) (becoming a Queen is related to the Victorian cultural breeding Alice received). Alice naively thinks that her mastering the game of chess will grant her equal rights to the other creatures and subsequently she will be treated as a member of this peculiar world. Alice does not get the sought recognition probably because she behaves neither as a piece on the chess board nor as a participant in the game. In this game, the pieces and the players, unlike Alice, do not seek recognition or the transgression towards another status (e.g. from being a pawn towards becoming a queen). Alice is still influenced by the social construction of power; therefore, she is aware of the importance of different positions or statuses. Her possible frustrations or repressed wishes concerning her position as a female child in the Victorian society are revealed by her struggle of 'becoming' a free woman, a queen, etc. "I don't want to be anybody's prisoner. I want to be a Queen." (p. 242)

Alice's identity or status is not so much resolved in the first book, because she is clearly different from the figures from the deck of cards, or from the animals encountered during her journey. All the time she is perceived as an outsider, as a foreigner, as an outcast in Wonderland. All characters from the first book look down on her with disdain and suspicion because she has not yet learnt the rules/laws of the imaginative worlds. Once she realizes she has to comply with these rules, Alice succeeds in behaving like the rest of the fantastic creatures and in getting the recognition of a full membership. In the second book Alice exhibits the accumulation of experience when she no longer is the confused child in Wonderland, but instead she has a goal: the achievement of a higher status. After having acted in accordance with the rules from the Looking Glass, Alice reaches the eighth square and becomes a queen receiving the same value as the White and the Red Queens, although the two sovereigns try to elbow or push Alice from her seat. Alice never anticipated her powerlessness as a queen: the other two queens still treat her as a child (Alice is given orders before and during the banquet) and sometimes no real option is left to her (e.g. her inability of entering her own party). When she wanted to claim her position as a queen, she had to ring one of the two bells: 'visitor' and 'servant'; being excluded from both classes she cannot gain admittance. Her status as "Queen Alice" is shown only in her name, it is never accompanied by a traditional growth in power. By letting others define her position and dominate her, Alice cannot gain authority. The sharing of sovereignty does not resist, hence the chaotic end of the chess game.

In the first book, Alice questions the absolute sovereignty of the cards, therefore her question "Who cares for you?" functions as a catalyst for the dissolution of Wonderland and for the return into the real world. In the second book Alice again provokes the dissolution of

Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses, ed. Robert Phillips, New York: Vanguard Press, 1971, pp. 9–10).

BDD-V558 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:52:18 UTC)

the Looking Glass when she exclaimed: "I ca'n't stand this any longer!" pulling violently the tablecloth and causing the general chaos among the chess pieces and other creatures. By throwing away the cards in the first book, by overturning the chess pieces from the second book Alice reveals her will of redefining her position – she defies the position held by the queens from the Looking Glass and Wonderland and at the same time she defies the established order from both fictional worlds. Each time Alice is sent back into the real world, because her Victorian education could no longer stand the state of chaos, anarchy and confusion dominating the imaginative worlds. With his books Lewis Carroll satirizes the 18th and 19th century narratives which present the 'rules' all children should obey – in case these rules were broken, the child was supposed to suffer frightening consequences. Carroll's books come as a response to the constant manipulation of children's fears. The writer undermines the traditional education trying to suggest the children into defying the adults' authoritarian voice: Alice learns to use puns, to elude the rigidity of adults' discourse, to express her own individuality, her own will. For the little girl the journeys into different dream-worlds represent in fact a way of learning how to deal with the adults' authority in the Victorian society and how to create a space of her own in the adults' world.

Bibliography

BORGEOIS, David C.C., *Making Space: the subversion of authoritarian language in Lewis Carroll's Alice books*, MA thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 2002.
CARROLL, Lewis, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, London, Wordsworth Editions, 2001.
FRYE, Northrop, "Literature and Law" in *Law Society of Upper Canada Gazette 70*, 1970.
LISTON, Mary, "The Rule of Law through the Looking Glass" in *Law and Literature*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, 2009, University of California Press, pp. 42-77.
MANLOVE, Colin, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*, Cybereditions, Christchurch, 2003.
MORRISON, John, "Stories for Good Children" in *Tall Stories? Reading Law and Literature*, ed. John Morrison and Christine Bell, Aldershot, UK, Dartmouth, 1996.
PHILLIPS, Robert (ed.), *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dreamchild as Seen Through the Critics' Looking-Glasses*, ed. Robert Phillips (New York: Vanguard Press, 1971), 9–10.
RACKIN, Donald. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass: Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991.
SUSINA, Jan, *Educating Alice: The Lessons of Wonderland//Jabberwocky: The Journal of Lewis Carroll Society*, nr. 71, 1989, pp. 3-9.
ZORNADO, Joseph L., *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood*, New York, Garland, 2001.

BDD-V558 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:52:18 UTC)