

## SUBVERSION OF AUTHORITY IN "ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND"

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### **Abstract**

*The majority of children's books are written by adults, thus, they inevitably show the image adults have in their mind about children/ childhood or how children should be like. The first part of our paper reveals the adult's wish to educate, manipulate or instruct children through these books. However, the outcome of this manipulation mirrors the child's possibility for achieving some form of autonomy in the worlds created by the adults. Consequently, we will analyse how these narratives increase the children's agency and their self-awareness in a manner that subverts the adults' authority.*

**Keywords:** *subversion, transgression of borders, withdrawal into the imaginary.*

During the last decades, the discussion concerning children's literature evolved around the construction of the fictional children and their relation to the adult. Most critics<sup>1</sup> consider the children's books as a tool through which the adults indoctrinate the children, but, at the same time, other voices<sup>2</sup> point out the subversive character of this kind of literature since these texts deal with themes that transgress gender stereotypes, social structures or cultural taboos. The subversive reading of these texts comes as a result of their transgressing nature. Our analysis focuses on such a book ("Alice's Adventures in Wonderland"), where the child is allowed to play more with its imagination, to liberate its playful spirit, to flee to imaginary worlds and to meet supernatural creatures.

In our paper we will first refer to the relations established between adults and children and to the education the young received through books and different institutions (schools, churches). Then, most of our paper analyzes the ways through the fictional child tries to subvert the adult's authority in its search for identity.

### **1. Distorted/coercive communication between adult and the child as the reason for the subversion of adult's authority**

Maria Lassén-Seger<sup>3</sup> argues that childhood should not be regarded only as a biological stage, and she points out the influence of socio-cultural life upon a child. Children usually distinguish themselves from adults through their innocence, but this feature eventually makes them objects into the adults' hands as parents often project their dreams onto their children. Jacqueline Rose<sup>4</sup> makes it clear that children's literature (or the animated films) can no longer be regarded as a passive reflection of society; instead it develops cultural concepts into the reader's subconscious. She further presents the relationship between the child and the adult as an impossible power relation in which the child is marginalised and considered powerless,

thus, the adults suggest in their books what a child ought to be, what values and images it should accept. For example Brothers Grimm's readers should take up the roles suggested by the female protagonists from fairy tales such as "Snow White" or "Cinderella", not copy the antagonists' behaviour lest they should suffer unpleasant consequences. Some stories have suffered metamorphoses and changes just to adapt themselves to the new generation's interests and tastes<sup>5</sup>. Fairy tales and children's books are shaped by or even generate social and cultural ideas of their time. To a greater degree than books, the animated movies contain elements from the contemporary life (even if the plot concerned a different century), just to teach children adapt to the new conditions. It seems the impact of visual representation of the fairy tales makes children believe that Disney's version is the real story and the exposure to these images alters the children's belief system. Thus, the children's books and animated films function as a socializing tool used to make children assume the society's dominant ideas about class, race and gender.

Going beyond the theory that finds children's literature more didactic than the fiction written for adults, Torben Weinreich<sup>6</sup> defines this fiction as "a type of literature which has clear communicative features [...] because the narratees, in other words the children, to a much greater degree than is the case in any other literature, are embedded in the author's creative process itself". Harald Weinreich's theory is also shared by Roger D. Sell<sup>7</sup> who suggests that all literature may be perceived as a form of communication, since it reveals the writer's desire to interact with his/her audience. Sell also implies that there are two types of communication: undistorted and coercive, where the undistorted communication between the writer and reader means that both respect each other's autonomy. The coercive communication interests the critics more because it needs a great force of persuasion over the reader. This coercive function of the children's literature helps the adults use the texts for children for educational purposes, and even the generation gap between adults and children can be bridged through the telling of stories. The powerful bond between Charles Dodgson and a little girl, Alice Liddell, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century must have been generated by the stories (the *Alice* books) invented during some rowing trips on the river Thames in which most of the Victorian values and restrictions are embedded.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the schools tended to make pupils learn through the memorization of information rather than of understanding it. If adults do not pay special attention to the understanding of information transmitted to children, the whole process of learning, of education is degraded to a plain strategy of asserting the teacher's/the adult's authority over the child. Jan Susina remarks that the children's "education is shown to have little to do

with understanding a subject but rather with making one feel superior to someone else"<sup>8</sup>. That is the reason why many adult characters from children's literature (the step-mothers, the Red and White Queen, the witches) are considered bullies; children are forced to behave properly and to give the right answers in front of these persons. For this reason, Lewis Carroll shows a great concern with Alice's education, or Brothers Grimm pay attention to the instructions that their female characters have to undergo, all these show the writers' concern with authority as experienced by the children (especially by girls). David Bourgeois<sup>9</sup> points out in his thesis the close relationship between language, education and issues of power and authority; Bourgeois insists upon the fact that all authoritarian acts in *Alice* books are committed mostly through language. Even in songs and puns there are threats or indications of physical violence – even if they were just "words", still the child/girl is inflicted with the idea of what might happen to her unless she listens to the adults' commands. Not only in Alice's dream worlds, but also in other fantasy places from other narratives, most adult characters use language as a way of asserting their authority over the female heroines. Our intention in other subchapters of this paper is to demonstrate not only that Alice faces the authoritarian use of language, but also to explore the ways through which this heroine knows or even learns how to resist this authority. What we have observed is the fact that the heroines find places where authority breaks down (Alice finds this in the Wonderland, Snow White in the dwarfs' cottage from the woods, Ariel – the little mermaid – seeks help in the bad witch's cave).

## 2. Forms of Subversion

### 2.1. Subverting the gender stereotypes

The main goal of the fairy tales and of the fiction for children is to educate or to instruct them. The 19<sup>th</sup> century texts allow the readers to analyse the representations of the child and make the readers understand that the child is presented as the Other – we find similarities between women's condition and that of the children, because both categories are constructed in literary works as the Other, who ultimately is colonized by male adults. The advantage of the children over women's condition lies in the fact that childhood is considered a transient stage in someone's life involving physical and mental change as an evolution towards adolescence and youth, whereas women are forced to accept their condition not only as a biological process, but also as a historical and cultural product.

The children's books aimed at educating children about the 'proper' gender roles and about the responsibilities they had to apprehend from an early age. The Victorian society in which Lewis Carroll wrote his famous books about Alice oscillated between exaggerated Puritan morality and financial prospects; however, it hypocritically concealed certain immoral

affairs and conformed to the traditional gender roles. Carroll was aware that children's books introduced their readers into the gender stereotypes due to their didactic nature: there existed specific stories for boys (full of journeys, adventures, crimes and fights) and those created specially for girls (which insisted upon friendship, loyalty, romantic love or on the domestic atmosphere). Both types of stories had as result the children's evolution but in two different directions: boys were taught to be strong, honest and fearless, whereas girls learned their lessons of domesticity, politeness and modesty. The dichotomy from these narratives is translated into the opposition between "the angel in the house"<sup>10</sup> and the vulgar prostitute. Unlike the ideal female archetype, in fairy tales the female protagonist is given more freedom and space in the beginning (many female protagonists rebel against the adults and try to allude the constraints imposed by the society), but later she is confined to the domestic sphere just as the Victorian woman is. The Victorian evil female characters no longer use charms and spells to harm their rivals, but instead they act by themselves using their bodies and minds: the prostitute, the mad woman, the criminal, *la femme fatale*. With "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" Lewis Carroll revolutionized the genre and at the same time the female cultural types used in narratives. He did not mention any vulgar, sensual woman, in order not to distract the child from setting free his/her imagination, instead, from time to time, Alice reminds herself to behave properly as a true Victorian lady as she was taught at home. Another radical change brought by Lewis Carroll was the fact that his heroine has the advantage other Victorian female characters did not enjoy: a journey full of adventures to unknown territories. The domestic sphere is derided during the episode in the Duchess' kitchen, there is no romantic relation depicted in the whole book, so, the writer succeeded in subverting the known traditional conventions. If fairy tales and their heroes/heroines fit the pattern or the traditional archetypes, Carroll's *Alice* modernizes the genre and its characters.

## 2.2. Subversion of authority through language

Even when they communicate, women's conversations disclose deficiencies and are not part of a public discourse. Most of the discussions between Alice and the creatures from Wonderland do not serve as ideal conversations because they generate confusion, inefficiency, deception, anger and quarrels. Besides these bizarre conversations, Alice receives all kinds of orders and commands from the royal figures ("Everybody says 'come on!' here", thought Alice... "I never was so ordered about before, in all my life, never!" ("Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", p. 95) or ambiguous instructions which lead to disastrous results if they were misinterpreted ("Drink me", "Eat me", p. 42-43). The readers do not know the purpose or the reasons of these messages. The discourses from the Wonderland also consist of various songs, puns and riddles uttered by all

sorts of animals or maddening figures. The characters' irresponsible behaviour can be translated as a subversion of their authority. The responses given by the residents from Wonderland are genuine, but without any justification. Alice is always trying to get some straight answers to her questions; she expects the others to behave like the adults from the real world, forgetting that the patriarchal rules do not apply to Wonderland. In the real world, children (especially the girls) feel frustrated for not being taken into consideration by the adults, because their voice is not listened to by their parents, whereas in Wonderland the Victorian girl feels again frustrated. Communication implies the presence of a sender, of a message and of a receiver; this process is complete when the receiver understands the sender's message. In Wonderland Alice is allowed to talk, to assume the role of a sender, but eventually she lacks eligible receivers; it seems that her messages are only transmitted, but never fully understood by the listeners, hence the communication process is never completed. Throughout the book the reader observes how Alice has a 'voice' (she is not silenced by the author), but her discourse is not worth being taken into consideration, she is as inferior to others as she feels in the real world. Her value in the eyes of others is the product of traditional conventions and stereotypes, and of the reflection of people's judgements. Because she disrupts the course of action in Wonderland, Alice is perceived as an outsider, a foreigner, as the Other. The creatures from Wonderland look at her contemptuously and suspiciously because she is not part of the general class, therefore, she cannot be valued or assigned any status. The reader traces Alice's efforts to find her identity, to get people's attention or to be known for what/who she is. Wonderland is a world of violence, of fear<sup>11</sup> but it resembles the real world since children are equally intimidated in both spaces.

If language represents a means of displaying one's authority, then the process of constructing one's identity is affected by language as well, since it begins with the act of naming. In the book we notice that names are associated with different entities and in the verbal interaction every name represents the special attributes of that particular thing. The act of naming is believed to be the result of our wish/need to classify, to make distinctions, to control the ones around us. If the name-giver extends his/her power on the objects named, names also have power over us. Lewis Carroll's heroine is puzzled after her first change of size, therefore, she asks herself several times who she really is, whether she is still the same person she was before: "I'm sure I am not Ada, [...] for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn't go in ringlets at all; and I'm sure I can't be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh, she knows such a very little!" (p. 37). She is even given a different name by another authority figure: the White Rabbit calls her Mary Ann. However, these names conferred to her have no meaning

unless she accepts this situation – by accepting a different name/identity, Alice accepts the name-giver to exercise power over her: she listens to the White Rabbit's orders when he mistakenly takes her for his servant. Alice resists to any attempt through which she is imposed a new identity or to any attempt to deconstruct her identity.

### **2.3. Subversion of authority through the transgression of borders**

#### **2.3. a. Transgressing the spatio-temporal border**

We have mentioned earlier in this paper that children often try to subvert the adults' authority and one of the methods used is their withdrawal into the imaginary, into an unreal world, into dreams. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century this desire appears in some fairy tales: the little mermaid longs for the humans' world; Cinderella (especially in the Disney version) prefers the world of magic and that of the animals because she interacts better with mice, dogs and birds. Snow White finds her temporary happiness in the dwarfs' cottage (somebody on her own size and power) because the adults' world does not accept her. All these heroines are shown as being dissatisfied with their condition, therefore, they disdain the old traditions and rituals, transgressing social and cultural borders. Seeking refuge in a different space represents the women's method of escaping the patriarchal order, of avoiding frustrations, depression and hysteria, of breaking their habitual passivity. We cannot say that there are more girls preferring the life in an unreal world than boys since Peter Pan and Harry Potter are famous for being alienated heroes in the real world. In "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", beyond the sophisticated problems of semantics, logic, physics and metaphysics, the reader should not ignore the fact that Carroll offered the (young) readers the adventures into the Underworld, choosing a female child protagonist, not a male one where Alice evades into the Wonderland being bored of the real world.

The book depicted the female protagonist's chance to travel outside the confinement of her houses, of her boudoirs, and to ignore her condition as passive, meek and silent human being. The subversive nature of her adventures was implied by a series of factors: on the one hand, Alice travels alone (until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decent women were not allowed to embark into a journey without a male companion by their side, otherwise this gesture would cost their reputation. The woman's exercise of free will risked to be considered something promiscuous, if not vulgar). On the other hand, Alice, being considered a typical middle-class Victorian child<sup>12</sup>, represented the Victorian mentality, ideology and behaviour, thus, she has the obligation to mould to the typology offered by society: placidity, naivety, purity, grace specific to all educated/civilized women. She should be shaped according to Coventry Patmore's concept of "angel in the house", leaving the public<sup>13</sup> scene to men. Women wanted to quench their thirst for travelling to distant

places, for adventure, for leaving their homes, hence their interest in fantasy literature, because this genre reconciled their hidden desires with their apparent decency and submissiveness. Fantasy met the people's need to transgress the limits imposed by society. Restricted by strict rules and morals, people were inspired to create a free world with no borders or limitations activated by their imagination. Alice opened the way to other female child protagonists in fantasy literature, such as Lyman Frank Baum's Dorothy in "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" (1900) or James Matthew Barrie's Wendy in "Peter Pan" (1904), both of them leaving the real world for the realm of fantasy and supernatural creatures. For these girls the reality of confinement is replaced by imaginative Wonderland, the Looking Glass, Land of Oz or Never-Never Land. Alice, Dorothy and Wendy are given the opportunity to experience fantastic adventures (which would never take place within the limits of the house) and to defy the typical "angel in the house".

Critics have examined Alice's destabilized identity, which is according to Gilles Deleuze's "The Logic of Sense" (1990) "becoming-homeless" and according to Catherine Driscoll's "The Little Girl" "becoming-woman"; both positions reveal the girl's intense desire of becoming a 'subject', of getting power, of freeing herself from the repressed identity ascribed to any Victorian woman. Alice's journey implies the phenomenon of "desubjectification": in her desperate attempts to evade domesticity (greatly acclaimed by the educated Western civilization), Alice embraces the nomad mentality (inspired by the anomalies specific to primitive tribes or to the Eastern civilization) in which people identify with animal, vegetal or mineral elements. According to Gilles Deleuze (in "The Ethics of Travel: from Marco Polo to Kafka" - 1996) and Syed Manzurul Islam travel can be divided into two categories: nomadic travel and sedentary travel. Islam suggests that a nomadic traveller will always choose the free, wild spaces specific to nomads who try to escape the present, whereas the sedentary traveller prefers to be restrained by rigid borders over a limited period of time. Wonderland threatens and dissolves the unities of space and time, defying reality through its lack of centre and margins, through its interchangeable nature and with its unlimited time. Alice's journey in Wonderland differs from her experiences in the world above which are particular to the woman's sedentary life. Wonderland with its fluid time and unbounded spaces forces Alice to become a nomadic traveller, granting her the perfect frame to escape the routine of reality. Then, Alice slides from being a sedentary traveller to a nomadic one; she leaves behind her confinement imposed by the Victorian society, a confinement imposed by her cultural breeding and education in order to accept the initiation into the new process of becoming. Syed Islam argues that as a sedentary traveller,

Alice does not really move from the boundaries imposed by her position, she feels enclosed by invisible fences and walls built by Victorian culture. Practically, once the girl enters the world of dream, she finds herself in front of a crossroad: she has to choose between becoming a nomadic traveller and lying in the state of sedentary traveller. Although the appearances suggest that Alice totally adopts the nomadic journey, in the end of the book she rejects this state, by waking up to the real world and by resisting the attacks in the court of justice. Her violent reaction towards the deck of cards from Wonderland indicates her reluctance to integrate into this world and to fully accept Wonderland's creatures as her mates. After having analysed both Deleuze and Islam's theory on nomadology and becoming, we can establish the mixed nature of Alice's adventures which combine the features of both nomadic and sedentary travels as she oscillates between the two positions. As a conclusion, Alice seems always to head to a certain direction, always to be driven by curiosity to discover new places and meet new beings, but never fully assuming her status as a traveller.

### **2.3. b. Transgressing the bodily borders**

The negotiation of power between adult and child comprises also the motif of metamorphosis, which may constitute a threat or a gender transformation, or the subversion of someone's power. Most of metamorphoses refer to magical changes in physical size and age (as in Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" - 1865). Besides the cases when children shrink or grow, the authors have offered stories when children turn into other/ mature persons, get supernatural powers, become beautiful or ugly, etc. The richness of the motif of metamorphosis is illustrated through the tales where animals are transformed into human beings (Hans Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" - 1837) or toys come to life (Carlo Collodi's "The Adventures of Pinocchio: Tale of a Puppet" - 1883).

Analysing the animated films which were inspired by different fairy tales or children's narratives, we have noticed that most of Disney's heroines do not want to trespass the boundaries imposed by patriarchal system; the Disney team sensed that even if in fairy tales the heroines were allowed to make a choice, their options were limited, therefore, the authors preferred to confine their heroines in different houses, castles, etc. An interesting approach to this motif of confinement is offered by both Hans Christian Andersen and Lewis Carroll. Andersen chooses to trap his female protagonist in her own body. The little mermaid falls into the Sea-witch's temptation and submits her body to a metamorphosis. Ultimately, she realizes that, in order to gain the prince's love, she has to surpass the limits of her body, she needs to express herself beyond the imprisonment of the human body. Lewis Carroll confines Alice into the White Rabbit's house; the interesting detail in this scene is the fact that Alice's body occupies the



whole space, almost destroying it. The body that occupies the whole dwelling is revealed in Disney's "The Little Mermaid", as well, with Ursula (the evil witch) transgressing the boundaries, therefore, her victims are reduced in size and appear emasculated just to give her enough space to express her personality.

Alice in Lewis Carroll's book submits her body to various transformations just to prove to herself that in her imaginary world she can express her independence, or gain her autonomy, something quite impossible to achieve in the 19<sup>th</sup> century England. As many other Victorian girls, she is marginalised, silenced or intimidated by the adults, hence her desire to equal the adults' position. However, when Alice gets her full size again, she expresses her desire not to be part of the imaginary world, since she has experienced the disadvantages of transgressing the boundaries of her own body. In the end she realizes that the creatures from Wonderland will not accept her status either she is short or tall. These experiences help her understand that no matter how tall she might be (equalling the adult's size) she gets the same attention as any other normal Victorian woman would receive in the real world. Alice's imaginary world offers her the necessary somatic transformations, but the atmosphere from the Wonderland did not come up to her expectations, she realizes the discrepancy between theory and practice, between dreams/games and reality. While she is growing and shrinking in physical terms, she does not change into a mature person. She longed for these physical transformations hoping to gain some authority; she noticed that in the real world taller persons (the adults) control everything, hence her hidden desire to be as tall as an adult. But she commits the mistake of believing that the same rules apply to Wonderland, as well. The reader also notices how Alice has already been indoctrinated with the Victorian principles, which she tries to apply in Wonderland. In the imaginary world everything is reversed, hence the traditional conventions from the Victorian society have no value.

### 3. Conclusions

Our paper tried to analyze the subversive strategies employed by Lewis Carroll in his book which granted his child character an escape from the adults' control and manipulation. Some of the constraints imposed by society referred to the patriarchal order which Lewis Carroll eluded by providing his female character with the means to liberate herself from the well-known gender stereotypes. These means of eluding the adult authority are: setting the background within the frames of a magic travel (fantasy is a literary strategy frequently used in children's literature which allowed the children to experience adventures outside the shelter provided by their parents and at the same time to ignore the constraints imposed by adults), providing a 'voice' to his female character (Alice is not silenced by the author as other heroines are in different fairy tales; on the contrary, Alice is

assertive considering that she tries to express her opinions as much as she could), transgression of different borders (spatial, temporal, bodily). In all these ways the girl was able to enjoy autonomy and to undermine the adult authority.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rose, 1984; Zornado, 2001; Zipes 1987.

<sup>2</sup>White, 1982; Lassén Seger, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Lassén-Seger, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Rose, 1984.

<sup>5</sup>"In each historical epoch fairy tales were generally transformed by the narrator and the audience in an active manner through improvisation and interchange to produce a version which could relate to the social conditions of the time" (Zipes, 1975, p. 125).

<sup>6</sup>Weinreich, 2000, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup>Sell, 2002, p. 1-26.

<sup>8</sup>Susina, 1989, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Bourgeois, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>The four-part poem, "The Angel in the House", written by Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore, celebrates his wife known for her charming and unselfish nature. The term is later used to embody the Victorian feminine ideal because these women were "willing to be dependent on men and submissive to them, and she would have a preference for a life restricted to the confines of home. She would be innocent, pure, gentle and self-sacrificing" (Gorham, 1982, p. 4).

<sup>11</sup>Liston, 2009, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup>Auerbach, 1973, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup>Deborah Gorham (1982, p. 4) emphasized the difference between public and private sphere, where men could consolidate their position as active, powerful and rational human beings through business, profession and politics, whereas women had to express their love and emotions in private spaces accepting the yoke of docility and domesticity.

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