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## FANTASTICAL ECOCRITICAL IMPORTANCE IN ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

Ecocritical writing is an avant-garde critical writing technique in which writers examine the relationship between the natural environment and literature. Professor Lawrence Buell from Harvard University is a leading advocate, and even explorer of the boundaries, of contemporary Ecocriticism. In *The Ecocritical Insurgency*, Buell comments about the myopic spectrum on which ecocritical writing is focused. Buell writes, “the neglect of swamplands as a literary-critical topic, despite the manifest importance of such marginal lands, not only in ecological research and environmental historiography but also [. . .] in literature as well” (5). In other words, as Buell himself puts it, “So far ecocriticism has focused overwhelmingly on nonmetropolitan landscapes” (5). This encompasses all natural processes in the world, but does not account for the unreal, such as in the book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll in which peculiar and queer interactions with nature are thickly littered throughout, until these actions reach a point of normalcy. Certainly a blatantly fictitious story, set in a fictitious land, can have ecocritical importance – Buell does not even account for this dimension of ecocritical writing. In accordance to Buell's desire to expand past the typical bourgeois focused ecocritical writing, I argue that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* provides a unique platform for an ecocritical perspective and audience, it is a fantasy story directed towards children, with blatant fabrications that have ecocritical importance. With an ecocritical eye towards incongruities between Alice and the narrator, imagery, and multi-level parallelism of adult female roles, they read is led to a new perspective of how anthropocentric norms are and indoctrinated human ideology.

Evaluating the relationship between Alice and the narrator through an ecocritical lens reveals a unique technique that Lewis Carroll uses to investigate the formation of human superiority. Carroll creates conflicting attitudes about nature between Alice and the narrator,

which eschews any preconceived notions the reader may have towards children, thereby inherently establishing and following anthropocentric norms. As Alice falls asleep and slips into her dream world, the omnipresent narrator journeys with Alice into her wonder land. Throughout Alice's journey through the paranormal the narrator accompanies Alice-without her knowledge – and is the readers' only constant link to the real world; often the narrator comments on Alice's interactions with anthropomorphic animals in a perspective that is much different than the one portrayed by Alice's commentary, but considered normal in the anthropocentric world the narrator comes from. A good example is when Alice talks to the caterpillar. Alice approaches the caterpillar demonstrating respect and speaks in a reverent manner when she answers the languorous caterpillar's famous "Who are you?" question. Alice replies, "[rather shyly] I – I hardly know, Sir [...] I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir" (Carroll 49). The repetition of the word Sir is prevalent during Alice's dialog with the caterpillar, and is contrasted by the narrator's references towards the bug:

Alice thought she might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might as well wait, as she had nothing else to do, and perhaps after all it might tell her something worth hearing. For some minutes it puffed away without speaking; but at last it unfolded its arms, took the hookah out of its mouth [ . . . italics added]. (50)

As emphasized by the italics in this quotation, the narrator continuously refers to the caterpillar as "it" – a very dehumanizing term despite all the anthropomorphic characteristics the caterpillar demonstrates. This difference between protagonist and narrator is important because it demonstrates two different ideologies: that of a young girl in her dream world, and that of an omnipotent, omnipresent narrator that internalizes the dogma of society. Wonderland exists in Alice's imagination, and any incongruence that the narrator adds to Alice's commentary is a reflection of the differences that exist between Alice and the narrator. Alice treats the animals with prejudices unknown to Alice in her wonderland. This suggests that these ideas are not innate to the young and innocent Alice, but are the result of society's aggrandizement of the human race,

by the human race. Furthermore, Alice can be seen as allegory to the typical stereotypes of a typical young girl: youthful, innocent, pretty, playful, curious, energetic, etcetera. By making this connection to an everyday child in society, Lewis Carroll adds an extension of Alice's unbiased thoughts towards nature, to everyday children throughout society. By doing this, Carroll is able to demonstrate that chauvinistic anthropocentric norms are not a natural element, but an invented human ideology.

An ecocritical lens on imagery also reveals a new perspective on anthropocentric norms. Lewis Carroll includes many episodes that connote a sense of mutual respect and equality between Alice and her surroundings through imagery. For instance, Carroll creates a rich anthropocentrically symbolic scene when Alice first discovers the garden- shortly after Alice tumbles down the rabbit's hole. Alice is so desperate to enter the garden through the tiny door, she is literally willing to physically change who she is in order to fit through, and to fit in. In fact, Alice morphs three times before she attains a size appropriate for the garden. This overt demonstration of will to fit in accentuates Alice's humble attitude towards nature, which reflects Alice's naiveté towards anthropocentric norms. This theme of innocence is further reinforced by Alice's trust in the drinking and eating the dubious eatables she finds – such as when she believes the potion will not hurt her, just because the bottle is not labeled poison. Carroll's deliberate demonstration of innocence, coupled with Alice's desire to fit in with her generated adventure-fantasy in nature further reinforces to the reader that anthropocentric norms are an adopted human trait – not an instinctive ideology.

Contrasting Carroll's illustration of Alice's desire to fit into her wonderland, the interactions between Alice, the Duchess, and the Queen divulges how symbolic adult roles influence children's perspective towards anthropocentric norms. While sauntering through her fantasy, Alice hears about the notorious Duchess in instances that collectively establish and bolster her superiority. A typical example of this is when Alice converses with the seemingly perpetually scurrying rabbit. Alice overhears the rabbit exclaiming, "The Duchess! The Duchess!

Oh my dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers! She'll get me executed, as sure as ferrets are ferrets!" (40). With this quotation from the rabbit, both Alice and the reader see the power and differentiation that humans possess in respect to animals within Alice's dream world – which can be a representation of how Alice perceives all adults to act in respect to nature. Later, this is further exemplified when Alice converses with the Duchess who is stirring a soup – arguably preparing to cook the pig that is dressed like a baby. During the conversation Alice says to herself, "If I don't take this child away with [. . .] they're sure to kill it in a day or two" (63). Soon thereafter, Alice is told that the baby is really a pig, and once the animal is stripped of its anthropomorphic characteristics, Alice lets the pig run loose. By including the Duchess's indifference towards the pig's safety, and even hinting towards intentions of consuming the pig, Lewis Carroll uses the Duchess's actions (such as throwing the pig up and down) and commentary to "dehumanize" the animal. Once Alice sees the animal dehumanized by the Duchess, she no longer feels responsible for its safety and lets it run loose – a reflection that the Duchess's actions had an impact on Alice's connection with the animal, and that Alice is starting to internalize ideologies of anthropocentric norms; had Alice not considered the pig a lesser being, then she would have continued to protect it like a baby human.

After Alice's encounter with the Duchess, she soon meets the Queen who is even more violent and tyrannical. When Alice hears the Queen cry, "Off with their heads!" at the befuddled gardeners, Alice responds, "You shan't be beheaded!" and then proceeds to hid the gardeners in a flower pot (81). Shortly after this, the Queen invites Alice to play croquet with her, and Alice happily obliges. This defiant act of courage coupled with Alice's willingness to follow the Queen, shows how Alice has not yet espoused a radical sense of human superiority, but has accepted this anthropocentric quality in adults. Furthermore, the Queen's willingness to suggest the beheading of guiltless anthropomorphic characters seems very cruel, but serves as a double edged sword in the Queen's sanguinary symbolic role. The Queen is one of the only human characters and reflects Alice's perception (all elements of wonderland are figments of Alice's imagination) of

adults' elevated superiority to animals in three ways: (1) holding a position of absolute power suggests the dominance humans have over nature, (2) the fact that she royalty further distinguish her from the rest of the animals, and (3) the Queen's references to violence de-humanizes the anthropomorphic characters in the book. Along this premise, the reader is able to make the connection of how an innocent, young, typical Victorian girl slowly transitions from a peer position in nature (as you see her-and she sees herself-in wonderland) to a normal position in an anthropocentric society-she sees the actions by the authority around her, and slowly starts to adopt these ideologies (such as when she no longer cared about the pig's safety).

By making both these power holders women, Carroll parallels Alice's sphere of influence in three different dimensions in his book. The first sphere of paralleled influence can be found in the Victorian age in which Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In this age, it was custom for women to raise girls, and the men to raise the boys. The second dimension of paralleled sphere of influence can be found in the short fictional section of the book (before Alice enters her wonderland). In this dimension Alice's older sister reads to her from a book-assuming an adult teaching role. The third dimension of paralleled influence exists in Alice's fantasy world-where Alice places women at a position of authority and influence. By accounting for these broad parallel of influences, the reader is once again able to connect how children are conditioned to internalize anthropocentric norms in these three different worlds. In other words, Carroll's parallelization between the worlds allows the reader to see how anthropocentric values portrayed in Alice's fantasy can be connected to the reader's world. As a result, the reader can see through Alice's actions how children slowly start to internalize and accept the anthropocentric ideologies that adults have.

With this in mind, it is arguable that had Alice been Alan (a male), the duchess and Queen would haven a Duke and King-paralleling the sphere of influence that "Alan" would have had. Expanding on this idea, the human power holders in this story are women only because Alice is a young girl. With consideration of the hypothetical Alan, the argument can be made that Alan

would have had an analogous experience in his wonderland-thus this reinforces my argument about anthropocentric norms in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; these norms are not innate to children-both boys and girls.

Spring-boarding off ecocritical pioneer, Lawrence Buell's desire to expand past ecocriticism monotonous focus on lakes, rivers, mountains, deserts, excreta, the realm of the unreal is an unexplored area of ecocriticism. Lewis Carroll's novella *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a great platform to study ecocritical significance in the paranormal. Looking at the fantasy through an ecocritical lens reveals to the reader a perspective of how anthropocentric norms are established. This lens exposes Alice as a young girl eager to fit into her surroundings-even if this means making some drastic modifications to her physical appearance. The omnipresent narrator is Alice's only connection to the outside world as/he (the narrator) travels with Alice into her wonderland-providing a contrast that highlights Alice's anti-prejudice attitudes towards anthropomorphic characters. Additionally, the lens reveals how anthropomorphic norms are slowly adopted by children during their interactions with adults which ultimately desensitize children to humans' egocentric attitudes and actions towards animals-making an allegory to the real world through Carroll's use of parallel spheres of influence. This parallel connection, not only from Alice's fantasy to her reality, but also from the novella to the real world, creates a multi-level relationships between the three-which ultimately allows readers to make an cortical link from the fantasy to the world in which they read about Alice. Furthermore, using a cortical lens on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* gives the novella a multi-perceptual quality that appeals to both children and adults (multi-generational). With *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* established ecocritical importance, further ecocritical readings of fantasy has the potential to have fantastical results.

Works Cited

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