

Anna Ober
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A Psychoanalytic Look at Alice in Wonderland

“It is impossible to gain conscious understanding of the life of Lewis Carroll or of the meaning of his written fantasy unless a psychoanalytic approach is used in the study.” (Skinner)

To many people, Lewis Carroll’s novel Alice in Wonderland just seems like a confusing distortion of reality. Starting at the beginning with Alice chasing a white rabbit wearing a waste coat and carrying a pocket watch, to her many adventures while in the rabbit hole, the story gives the impression of being a fairytale of sorts. To analyze the story on strictly an amateur level, some may say that it is merely a children’s book of dream sequence adventures. However, when evaluating Carroll’s novel using a psychoanalytical approach, many interesting comparisons arise. I would like to look at Alice in Wonderland using the Freudian concepts of violence (aggression), the anal stage, oral stage, and phallic stage.

To give a brief overview of psychoanalysis I am going to look at the four broad definitions of Freudian psychoanalysis. 1) A theory of mental functioning and human nature. 2) A theory of psychological development. 3) A theory of psychopathology, particularly of the neuroses. 4) A method of treatment. (Encyclopedia of Psychology) What establishes Freud apart from other psychoanalysts is that his emphasis was on unconscious mental processes, particularly unconscious wishes, desires, and defenses. (Encyclopedia of Psychology) Freud thought that almost all behavior including dreams, neurotic symptoms, and slips of the tongue, as well as intentional behavior, was a result of the inner conflict occurring in a persons mind. He also felt that aggressive and sexual drives were being subdued in order to project a sense of normality. According to Freud, the two basic drives or instincts in humans are sex (libido) and aggression. (Encyclopedia of Psychology) Even with this basic knowledge of psychoanalysis, it is easy to distinguish the blatant usage in Alice in Wonderland.

Violence is not only a basic human drive, but is also a common and recurring theme in Alice in Wonderland. Why is there so much violence in Alice in Wonderland and is it connected to a Freudian theory or concept? I believe that the answer to this question is yes. One of the basic and core elements to Freudian theory is the unconscious mind. Things that you would not be able to express in real life are expressed in dreams or through “Freudian slips”. A basic instinct that is looked down upon is defiantly violence. People are always being told to not hit their brother or stop biting your sister when in reality all you want to do it hit harder and bite deeper. Because Alice is in this dream world, actions that would be seen as abusive or even illegal are everyday happenings. The characters involved in Alice’s dream do not have the reprimand of people in the real world. In result, they can do whatever they please to whoever, whenever.

One of the major characters that uses violence to solve all of her problems is the Queen of Hearts. When Alice first ventures into the rose garden she sees three gardeners painting white roses red. She sits and watches them argue for a while and then is so puzzled by the situation that she has to inquire about their actions. “Would you tell

me, please,” said Alice, a little timidly, “why are you painting those roses?” (Carroll)
 The cards (gardeners) responded. “Why, the fact is, you see, Miss, this here ought to have been a red rose-tree, and we put a white one in by mistake; and, if the Queen was to find out, we should all have our heads cut off, you know.” (Carroll)

This is only the beginning of the violent acts the Queen tries to achieve. During Alice’s visit with the Queen she joins in on a game of croquet which turns out to be a huge mess of people running all around with no direction. The Queen, once again uses violence to get her point across to the other members of the croquet game. “The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarreling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, “Off with his head!” or “Off with her head!” about once in a minute.” (Carroll) The longer Alice is around the Queen, the more frightened for her life she becomes knowing that soon her head was sure to come off.

While in the rabbit hole, Alice wanders into the house of the Duchess and her cook. Not long after Alice enters the house the cook begins to throw pots and pans around the room, mainly at the Duchess and the baby that she is nursing. Alice begs her to be careful and even informs her that she almost knocked the baby’s nose clean off but the cook pays no attention. Alice soon realizes that the Duchess is not very concerned with the baby’s well being mainly because of the constant violent shakes she is giving it while reciting a nursery rhyme. “While the Duchess sang the second verse of the song, she kept tossing the baby violently up and down, and the poor little thing howled so, that Alice could hardly hear the words.” (Carroll) “If I don’t take this child away with me,” thought Alice, “they’re sure to kill it in a day or two.” (Carroll) The Duchess, of course, is also in favor of the well known line, “Off with her head” for she yells it at Alice as soon as she says something displeasing.

The Mad Hatters tea party is not only a completely bazaar event, but a violent one too. While at the tea party, it is apparent to Alice that the dormouse is getting its fair share of being picked on by the March Hare and the Mad Hatter. If it is not having tea poured on its nose, it is being shoved into a teapot or told to be quiet. Most of the time it is just being ignored by all of the other tea party guests and only spoken to when a riddle wants to be heard. Going along with the idea of Alice being in a dream; when the Mad Hatter recited a riddle he started with one that Alice knew. Of course he does not say it in the same way that Alice does everyday for her lessons. It is almost as if he is in a dream or maybe even drunk and he recites the stories.

‘Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!

How I wonder where you’re at!’

“You know the song perhaps?”

“I’ve heard something like it,” said Alice.

“It goes on you know,” the Hatter continued, “in this way:-

‘Up above the world you fly,

Like a tea-tray in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle----” (Carroll)

“Psychoanalytic stages, or psychosexual stages, are stages of psychosexual development postulated by Freud to account for personality development. Based on the assumption that early childhood experiences importantly shape adult personality, social experiences at each stage presumably leave some permanent residue in the form of attitudes, traits, and values acquired at that stage.” (Encyclopedia of Psychology)

Freud believed that there were three different stages in which you had to successfully pass through as a child. If you did not pass fully and got stuck in one of these stages, in return you would encompass some certain distinctive traits.

The Oral stage is the first stage of psychosexual development. It lasts through the first year of a child’s life and involves mainly the mouth including sucking, swallowing, and biting. People who have a fixation with the Oral stage may be needy and dependent counting on others to continually help them. They may also be obsessed with putting things in their mouth or in return, not letting things enter their mouth.

Alice is the perfect example of a person stuck in the Oral stage. Throughout the story Alice is very lost and cannot find her way home or do much of anything without the help of the creatures who live in Wonderland. She is constantly asking for directions and advice from the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the Dodo, and the White Rabbit. She is completely helpless without them even though they are usually telling her things that do not make much sense at all.

“Cheshire-Puss,” she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however it only grinned a little wider. “Come, it’s pleased so far,” thought Alice, and she went on. “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where-” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“-so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

Alice also finds herself throughout the story eating or drinking one thing or another and in return, growing shorter or taller. In the very beginning of the journey Alice finds herself in a room with doors that are much too small for her to fit through. She eventually finds a bottle that says drink me and obeys. Immediately she shrinks down into the perfect size to fit through the door but is informed by the doorknob that she has forgotten the key. She now has to eat a cookie that of course says “eat me” on it so that she can reach the key. She does so; gets the key and then drinks the liquid yet again so that she can fit through the door.

The cookies are available later in her tale when she is in the rabbits house. While in the house she comes across the “eat me” cookies and for some reason has forgotten what the reaction to eating them is going to be. She takes a bite and suddenly fills up the whole house. While talking with the Caterpillar she is still the three inches high she had to become so that she could fit through the door. She decided that three inches is a dreadful height to be and so the Caterpillar encourages her to eat one side of the mushroom or the other.

“One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.”

“One side of what? The other side of what?” thought Alice to herself.

“Of the mushroom,” said the Caterpillar, just as if she had asked it aloud; and in another moment it was out of sight. (Carroll)

The second stage of Freud’s three stages lasts from the first through the third years of your life and is called the Anal Stage. At this point in a child’s life the only aspect they get to control is their anus. “With the onset of parentally controlled toilet training, however, the child’s pleasures in this regard encounter the stiff opposition of social restraints, and various fixations may occur.” (Encyclopedia of Psychology) Some other aspects of the Anal Stage were also talked about in the Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science. It says that a person may be stingy, withholding, conflicted about authority, and obsessed with order and cleanliness.

In the tale of Alice in Wonderland there is more than one character that fits the role of being anal. The White Rabbit is the very first character that we see in the story and it just so happens that he is an extreme case when it comes to being anal. The first words we hear come out of his mouth are “I’m late!” He continuously is running through the story line getting more and more upset that he is still late for whatever engagement that he has. Later, when he sees Alice by his house he orders her to go and get him his gloves and a fan not realizing who she is. When she later drinks the bottle of growing liquid and gets stuck in his house, the rabbit will not go inside himself to get her out but sends in Bill the gardener. He of course would not want to get his own clothes dirty in the chimney. When the rabbit finally gets to where he has been trying to go throughout the whole story, we finally come upon someone who is even more anal than he.

The Queen of Hearts, whose violence I explained earlier, is also an extremely anal character. Her obsession with cutting people’s heads off is not only a sign of violence but also one of her fixation with order and obedience. If someone does not do exactly what she says when she says it she throws a fit. This is also obvious when it comes to the cards painting the roses red. They are so afraid for their lives that they try to fix their mistake by painting the roses. The Queen is so fascinated with the color red that it has to be everywhere. The image of red is in many places such as blood, paint, and hearts. It is stated in the story that even her face turns crimson when she gets mad. I don’t think that it is a coincidence that she is the Queen of Hearts, an image that is usually seen as being red. (a heart) The interesting concept is that the Queen does not act like she has a heart herself. She is quick to anger and violence and shows no affection to anyone. It is almost as if she is withholding or stingy with her love not feeling anyone deserves it. This is yet another aspect of the Anal Stage. Something else that I have noticed about the Queen of Hearts is that even though she acts as if she is ok with the amount of authority she possesses, she is actually conflicted. If you read carefully, the Queen sentences many people to death but never actually kills them. During the croquet match she sentences just about everyone to have their head cut off but then she would have no one to play the game with. She wants to be mean and cruel, but in reality, she cannot go through with her threats.

The third and final stage of Freud’s three is the Phallic Stage. This lasts from about the fourth through the fifth years of life and is based mainly on sexual desires and development. One aspect of the Phallic Stage is competitiveness with members of the same sex. Many people also see this as the Oedipus complex which is the unconscious wish of a child to want the opposite sex parent. Another aspect of this stage is the inhibition to stand out from others or to compete. Throughout Alice’s trip she cannot

stop standing out from the other creatures. The major difference is that she is a human child and all the other characters are make-believe. They all keep asking her who she is, and where she is from, and even what she is because she is not like anyone else from Wonderland. Another example would be the fact that Alice is always either too big or too small and eats or drinks something to make up for it. In the beginning she is first too big to fit through the door and then too small to get the key off the table. She then eats part of the mushroom and grows so tall that she is as big as a tree. Not only does she stand out from everyone else but frightens them as well.

“Come, my head’s free at last!” said Alice in a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment, when she found that her shoulders were nowhere to be found: all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her.” (Carroll) Continuing on with these same examples would now lead us to when she eats the cookie in the rabbit’s house and fills it all the way up.

All of these instances of being too big and too small lead me to think that Alice has some sort of fixation with body image and in return does not want to stand out anymore. In her real life maybe she does not feel as if she fits in and so this sensation is manifested into her dream world as well. I’m sure everyone at one point in time would have loved to have a cookie that made us almost disappear or make us bigger and better than everyone else in the room.

When it comes to competitiveness with members of the same sex, I think that the Duchess and the Queen make a perfect example. When Alice is a guest of the Queens she asks the white rabbit where the Duchess is and why she is not at the party. The rabbit quickly quiets Alice and explains that the Duchess and the Queen do not get along and that the Duchess is under sentence of execution. Puzzled, Alice inquires as to why this would be. “She boxed the Queens ears-” the rabbit began. (Carroll) These women not only both have royal titles but are very alike as well. They are both very strong women who want to show authority at all times. They even both say “Off with their heads!” They mainly butt heads because they are intimidated by one another and do not want it to show.

Lewis Carroll was a wonderful writer of books and imaginative tales. The reason that I did not put “children’s” books is because they are undoubtedly for everyone who enjoys using their imagination. Alice in Wonderland can be seen as a quaint and silly children’s book and maybe should stay that way for the sake of our children and the children of the future. It would be, however, not quite as much of a journey if we didn’t look into its endless possibilities.

“To make the dream story from which Wonderland was elaborated seem Freudian one has only to tell it.” (Empson; Ciolkowski)