

BA Illustration Hons – **Research in Practice** (ADAD5004)

Independent Project Proposal

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Proposed Question:

Wonderland; the Faces of Alice, Her Evolutions and the Rabbit Hole. What do they Represent?

How do they Manifest within her World?

My proposal aims to explore the three keywords; Fairytale, Character, and Dream. I have selected these words to help analyse the Alice in Wonderland story and aid in my research into Wonderland and what it represents. I hope to illuminate why wonderland exists as a phenomenon in narrative and possibly how it has been so pervasive throughout time and art. This proposal will ultimately help me arrive at a question to further my independent project.

Fairytale

We are often subjected to fairytales as children and left to fantasise the future we can envision for ourselves. Though not usually able to come to fruition, many of us will remember fairytales fondly as well as the idealised worlds they present to us. In essence, this is just another form of escapism. In this case, the word escapism will be used considering this definition of it;

A typically pejorative term for behaviour perceived as a retreat from the problems, routines, and tensions of everyday reality by seeking distraction or relaxation in entertainment or fantasy
(Chandler & Munday, 2020)

This definition will ideally be used as the basis for the analysis around fairytales and, furthermore, Wonderland itself. Escapism is a double-edged sword. One that may help a person or drive them down a path of refusing to acknowledge their current self. This exists within fairytales more so, being idealised worlds where the villains get punished and the heroes have their dream come true. Wonderland also follows this trend by having the Queen of hearts have her comeuppance and Alice waking up just in time for tea.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll, 2015)

In this fashion, Alice’s story had followed the tried-and-true dynamic between hero and villain, allowing us to dream of following this dynamic within our own lives, perhaps with a disliked teacher or bully. In this form, Alice’s Wonderland serves as escapism from the powers that be, the very same that shelter those who may be acting in bad faith. Is this a bad thing, however? The idea that fairytales are a form of escapism is not a new idea in the slightest, and the concept rarely sees detractors.

Escapism – the idea that the experience will allow the spectator to “escape” from the pressures and stress of their everyday routines by entering a self-contained, manufactured world that offers respite, if only temporarily. (Bolus, 2019)

Wonderland does offer this respite, as Alice is quite literally able to escape from where she currently is by retreating to Wonderland, a world within her dreams. Considering that Wonderland exists within her dreams, one could argue that it is fair to say that Wonderland is designed and manufactured with her preferences in mind, allowing Alice to go on a remarkable adventure while coming to little harm. As Callois (1966) states;

There is nothing too absurd, too miraculous, or too contradictory of which one may not dream.
(Callois, 1966)

This supports the notion that Alice's Wonderland can be a form of escapism whilst retaining the essence of bizarre whimsy that it presents. Within wonderland, Alice is able to go anywhere, and do anything she wishes, all whilst not suffering any consequences for otherwise questionable decisions.

In classic Wonderland, Alice enjoys perfect weather, creatures, and conversations; even meets royals; and even becomes a queen. (Hollingsworth, 2009)

With everything going well for Alice, one can hardly claim Wonderland isn't a net positive. In fact, it brings about the very nature of wish fulfilment. Wonderland is a land of wish fulfilment, allowing Alice to indulge in all manner of activities she may not usually, be it causing mischief, eating to her hearts content or even becoming royalty. Nothing is off the table when whatever

you want can be granted without question or scrutiny. On the nature of storytelling, Margaret Kerrison briefly explains what function wish fulfilment can serve for the audience;

Every experience should have one or more wish fulfilments. It's the promise of your experience. This may come in the form of a bucket lost – what your audience can see, do, eat, drink, feel, and experience. (Kerrison, 2022)

Further expounding upon Wonderland's function as a wish granter, Alice becomes a surrogate for the audience, allowing them to experience what Alice is experiencing, further pushing them into Wonderland itself, immersing them in its world. In that way, Wonderland is quite captivating, almost concerningly so. This is the function of Wonderland, within the original tale at least. However, we do not live in Wonderland, and we will live with the consequences of our actions, and without those wishes necessarily coming to, and so a question is asked. Could this possibly have further consequences on the reader? And does Wonderland influence Alice? Or rather, does Alice influence Wonderland? A philosopher asked their class who their most influential female figure in media was, and the following was stated;

They (the students) understand the story of a young woman who has the world before her, ready to embark on life, who changes herself. (Davis, R. B., 2010)

This implies that, for better or for worse, Alice's Wonderland indeed has an impact on those who experience her adventures and, furthermore, are influenced by her tale of self-discovery and sometimes stand-offish nature. Alice's choices in Wonderland do have some impact on her character as well, becoming more assertive and empowered by having defeated the Queen of

Hearts, as well as acting as carefree as ever at the end of the tale. It is also safe to say that, ultimately, Alice and her Wonderland have a symbiotic relationship, of sorts. Alice forms Wonderland, but Wonderland helps Alice explore herself in a risk-free environment, free from consequences and possible trouble that her choices may confront her with. Wonderland creates space for Alice to learn about herself, exercise her free will, and live out her childhood in a world of her own design. It is safe to say that Wonderland provides a lot of benefits to Alice, and to readers who may go on her journey with her. What if Wonderland reflects Alice's own character, however?

Character

There have been many adaptations and variations on the story of Alice, and Wonderland has become a concept somewhat removed from her as well. One of many adaptations of Alice's story comes from American McGee's Alice series. Telling its story in the form of a game series, McGee reimagines the Alice in Wonderland story by turning it into a gothic psychological horror, inspecting Alice as a character, and developing her further alongside the world she lives in. In McGee's version of the story, Alice is mentally unstable and has been committed to an asylum where Wonderland presents itself as a nightmare where Alice must fight the manifestations of her past.



Fig. 1, *Alice: Madness Returns*, American McGee, 2011

The narrative interrogates Alice's character by personifying Wonderland as well. Her Wonderland, or rather, what it has become is a reflection of Alice's twisted mind. Saying Wonderland is shattered and dead to her (McGee, 2011). It characterises Wonderland as a reflection of everything Alice wants to leave behind, however, Wonderland is still just a much a part of her as is her past. Wonderland tells us more of her past, her mistakes, and her fond memories. This is a sign that Wonderland is a visual representation of Alice's mind, and perhaps can reveal more about her than Alice's own words. Throughout the game, Wonderland reveals to us how her family tragically died as well as how Alice managed to escape. Alice's story and emotions can further impact us, as well. On the topic of character, Phelan (1989) states;

A character is a represented person and the emotions we feel about that character are the emotions we feel about people in life (Phelan, 1989)

This furthers the importance of Wonderland within the narrative, as it helps to construct our opinion and feelings towards characters like Alice, characters that may need help rather than continued scrutiny. The idea of Wonderland being able to influence our feelings becomes possible too, as Wonderland is an extension of Alice, and further informs our view of her. Wonderland and Alice become connected; one cannot exist fully without the other. That is the function of Wonderland within McGee's vision. McGee innovated the Alice in Wonderland story to include Wonderland as a feature that cannot be removed or changed within reason and must be considered when analysing Alice's character.

Alice isn't particularly liked by the denizens of Wonderland, often being described as "mad" and often parroting the words and sentiments of her therapist Dr. Bumby. Dr. Bumby is the main antagonist of the game, as he forces his views onto Alice and is revealed to be corrupting her Wonderland himself, turning Alice into a sympathetic figure and an underdog. Wonderland continues to be characterised through this, described as being damaged. After Alice has confronted Dr. Bumby, the Cheshire cat explains;

Forgetting pain is convenient, remembering it... agonizing. But recovering the truth is worth the suffering and our Wonderland, though damaged, is safe in memory... for now. (McGee, 2011)

This further deepens the character of Alice by emphasising how she's grown as a person, and Wonderland mirroring her mind leads to deeper understanding of her state of mind better than any words could do justice, appearing peaceful and bright for the first time in the narrative. Alice is characterised to be a resilient force that doesn't stop fighting, even in the face of things she may not be able to entirely control. McGee plays into this too, by writing Alice as a snippy,

sarcastic but ultimately kind young woman who is dealing with her struggles, which makes her a very intriguing and sympathetic character. Linda Seger writes on how these backstories are important:

The ways people internalise these (past) events, sometimes repressing them or redefining them, based on the negative or positive emotional effect they've had on their lives, is equally important. Often it is not a particular circumstance that determines a character's psychological makeup; rather it's how she or he reacts to the circumstances (Seger, 1990)

We see this truly reflected in Alice's character, seeing how she reacts to potentially triggering imagery throughout the story. Losing her family to a house fire has left her damaged and she simply is not getting the help she needs. As such, we see her make panicked and frantic decisions and acting impulsively throughout the narrative. Her feelings towards her past have caused her to act without much thought and repeatedly rush into potentially dangerous situations without much consideration for her safety.

What is the point of this analysis, however? Wonderland, through stories like McGee's, becomes more than itself, coming to represent more than a simple idealised dream world. Wonderland can embody so much more than a simple fantasy. It can house memories and warp itself around it's respective Alice. It can represent everything Alice needs to leave behind or show her truths that she needs to take to heart. Wonderland can be a true reflection of who she is, without the frills and softened edges. Wonderland, though simple in concept, can be highly specifically tailored to its respective Alice and what we can learn about her or even from

her. Wonderland can speak directly to the audience and deliver a message within the meta narrative.

Narrative is conceived of as an 'invariant core of meaning' distinguishing it from all other types of discourse, and allowing it to be transported or carried across time, culture and medium.

Thomas, B. (2016)

Narrative, as we know, can mean different things to different people, allowing various interpretations of one singular piece of writing. Furthermore, the potential of narrative and character to have linear and non-linear properties allow them to convey a message more efficiently and personally than conventional real-world communication. This, in effect, is what separates Alice in Wonderland from the typical fairytale as well from the typical character. Alice can be interpreted in many ways, and that interpretation will go on to affect how one interprets Wonderland and vice versa, creating a paradox of sorts where Alice changes Wonderland, and Wonderland changes Alice, who will then change Wonderland once more. This paradox is the potential of Alice and her Wonderland, being able to convey all manner of messages and meanings through a simple, yet infinitely evolving formula. Wonderland itself may also serve as a paradox.

Dream

If Wonderland is a true reflection of Alice, then what can Wonderland tell us? If Wonderland is composed of Alice's dreams, ambitions, fears, anxieties, then does Wonderland symbolise Alice's dreams or delusions? As already established, Wonderland is a form of escapism.

Who hasn't--sometime—wanted to escape? But from what? To where? And once we have arrived at the good place, is this the end of the desire to move? (Tuan, 2020)

This calls Alice's motivations into question. Why does Alice want to escape to Wonderland? If Wonderland represents an escape, as it does, then what parts of Wonderland allow her to escape? To answer that, an understanding of how Wonderland functions as a dream is in order. Dodge Fernald elaborates;

The unconscious appears in dreams, Freud speculated, because the ego becomes less vigilant during sleep. (Fernald, 2008)

If Wonderland is a dream, then it may manifest unconscious thoughts and feelings that Alice may carry without even knowing. Furthermore, it may even imply that Alice exploring Wonderland could be indicative of her exploring, discovering, and working through her subconscious mind. From there, one can speculate about many aspects of Wonderland, such as the Queen of Hearts and the Caterpillar. The Caterpillar could be a manifestation of Alice's existential musings and pondering, whilst the Queen of Hearts could embody an abrasive, controlling side to her psyche. The Queen of Hearts is also usually depicted to have explosive anger. Regarding anger, Mick Power and Tim Dalglish write;

Anger is a profoundly uncomfortable emotion. Its association with sometimes uncontrollable aggression and violence – and, moreover, the attributions of blame and intent which always lurk beneath the surface – ensure that, for many of us, giving vent to our anger is something rarely indulged. (Power, Dalglish, 2016)

This association with violence, with aggression may make someone unlikely be to be fully conscious of their anger and may even not be aware of their capacity to feel anger to an extent. Considering Wonderland as a narrative tool and as a dream, Alice is able to feel these extreme emotions, and to acknowledge them in a safe environment. This creates a space for Alice to confront herself in a fashion that may not be possible as other environments. In addition to this, Wonderland, being a dream, may be able to present Alice with before-unseen repressed memories as well. Seger has this to say on the matter;

These elements, which are often repressed because of negative associations, drive our behavior, causing us to act in ways that might contradict our belief systems or our own understanding of ourselves. (Seger, 1990)

In fact, this theme has been used within an adaptation of Alice in Wonderland. Returning to McGee's version of Alice, Wonderland reveals Alice's repressed memories before her, leading to various plot twists and reveals throughout the game. The fact that Alice's psychiatrist is responsible for her families' death, is only one of them. In this sense, Wonderland almost becomes a form of therapy, allowing its creator to tap into their unconscious and discover internal biases and repressed emotions and memories. This theme transforms Wonderland

entirely, becoming strictly a visual manifestation of Alice's mind, in contrast to the usual melting pot of dreamlike qualities, psychological analysis and plain whimsy.

Conclusion

Alice is a tale as old as time and, as such, has evolved and changed throughout the years as new people come to re-invent and re-interpret the story and its themes. There are little narrative tropes with the vast potential and scope of Alice and her Wonderland. From the original tale being little more than a short novel to entertain children, to a dark and gritty horror series meant to evoke deep psychological questions within the viewer. Wonderland can represent many things, be it a dream, a reflection of oneself, an independent entity capable of housing its own will, Wonderland is curious narrative tool that has stood the test of time and arguably gone on to inspire many fictional worlds meant to fulfil one's dreams and ambitions, albeit within the confines of fiction and fantasy. The biggest question remains. Considering Wonderland; The faces of Alice, and the Rabbit hole, what do they represent? How do they manifest within her world? I aim to explore further the full potential of Wonderland and how the different versions of Alice contrast each other and how they influence how Wonderland manifests within their respective worlds.

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List of figures

Fig 1, McGee, A. (2011) *Alice: Madness Returns*.