

THE CHILD IN *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

The shifting meanings of words according to context: speakers & auditors; adult & child readers

1. 'Such a trial dear Sir, With no jury or judge would be wasting our breath.' 'I'll be judge, I'll be jury,' said cunning old Fury: 'I'll try the whole cause and condemn you to death.'
2. Dinah's our cat. And she's such a capital one for catching mice, you can't think! And oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she'll eat a little bird as soon as look at it!
3. When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I'll write one -- but I'm grown up now,' she added in a sorrowful tone: 'at least there's no room to grow up any more here.'
'But then,' thought Alice, 'shall I never get any older than I am now? That'll be a comfort, one way -- never to be an old woman -- but then -- always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn't like that!' 'Oh, you foolish Alice!' she answered herself. 'How can you learn lessons in here? Why, there's hardly room for you, and no room at all for any lesson-books!'
4. 'I'm not a serpent, I tell you!' said Alice 'I'm a -- -I'm a -- -'
'Well! What are you?' said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something!' 'I -- I'm a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.
'A likely story indeed!' said the Pigeon in tone of the deepest contempt. 'I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and There's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!' 'I have tasted eggs, certainly,' said Alice, who was a very truthful child; 'but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'
'I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon; 'but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say.'
This was such a new idea to Alice, that she was quite silent for a minute or two, which gave the pigeon the opportunity of adding, 'You're looking for eggs, I know that well enough; and what does matter to me whether you're a little girl or a serpent?'
5. At this moment the door of the house opened, and a large plate came skimming out, straight at the Footman's head : it just grazed his nose, and broke to pieces against one of the trees behind him.
' -- or next day, maybe,' the Footman continued in the same tone, exactly as if nothing had happened. 'How am I to get in?' asked Alice again, in a louder tone.
'Are you to get in at all?' said the Footman 'That's the first question, you know.'
It was, no doubt: only Alice did not like to be told so. 'It's really dreadful,' she muttered to herself, 'the way all the creatures argue. It's enough to drive one crazy!'
The Footman seemed to think this a good opportunity for repeating his remark, with variations 'I shall sit here,' he said, 'on and off, for days and days.'
'But what am I to do?' said Alice.
6. 'You don't know much,' said the Duchess; 'and that's a fact.'
Alice did not at all like the tone of this remark, and thought it would be as well to introduce some other subject of conversation. While she was trying to fix on one, the cook took the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby -- the fire-irons came first; then followed a shower of saucepans, plates, and dishes. The Duchess took no notice of them even when they hit her; and the baby was howling so much already, that it was quite impossible to say whether the blows hurt it or not.
'Oh, please mind what you're doing!' cried Alice, jumping up and down in an agony of terror 'Oh, there goes his precious nose!' as an unusually large saucepan flew close by it, and very nearly carried it off.
'If everybody minded their own business,' the Duchess said in a hoarse growl, 'the world would go round a deal faster than it does.'

'Which would not be an advantage,' said Alice, who felt very glad to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge. 'just think what work it would make with the day and night! You see, the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis -- -'

'Talking of axes,' said the Duchess, 'chop off her head!'

Alice glanced rather anxiously at the cook, to see if she meant to take the hint; but the cook was busily engaged in stirring the soup, and did not seem to be listening, so she ventured to go on again

'Twenty-four hours, I think; or is it twelve?'

'Oh, don't bother me,' said the Duchess; 'I never could abide figures!' And with that she began nursing her child again, singing a sort of lullaby to it as she did so, and giving it a violent shake at the end of every line:

7. 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 felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. 'What sort of people live about here?'

'In that direction,' the Cat said, waving its right paw round, 'lives a Hatter: and in that direction,' waving the other paw, 'lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they're both mad.'

'But I don't want to go among mad people,' Alice remarked.

'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat: 'we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.

'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

Alice didn't think that proved it at all; however, she went on. 'And how do you know that you're mad?'

'To begin with,' said the Cat, 'a dog's not mad. You grant that?'

'I suppose so,' said Alice.

Well, then,' the Cat went on, 'you see, a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased.

Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.'

'I call it purring, not growling,' said Alice.

'Call it what you like,' said the Cat.

'Did you say pig, or fig?'

'I said pig,' replied Alice; 'and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy.'

'All right,' said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'

8. Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least -- at least I mean what I say -- that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter, 'You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'

'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like!'

'You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse who seemed to be talking in his sleep 'that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'

'It is the same thing with you,' said the Hatter

9. 'Ah! that accounts for it,' said the Hatter. 'He won't stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he'd do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o'clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you'd only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!'

10. However, he consented to go on. 'And so these three little sisters -- they were learning to draw, you know -- -'

'What did they draw?' said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

'Treacle,' said the Dormouse, without considering at all this time.

'I want a clean cup,' interrupted the Hatter: 'let's all move one place on.'

He moved on as he spoke, and the Dormouse followed him: the March Hare moved into the Dormouse's place, and Alice rather unwillingly took the place of the March Hare. The Hatter was the only one who got any advantage from the change: and Alice was a good deal worse off than before, as the March Hare had just upset the milk-jug into his plate.

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: 'But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?'

'You can draw water out of a water-well,' said the Hatter; 'so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well -- eh, stupid?'

'But they were in the well,' Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

'Of course they were,' said the Dormouse; 'well in.'

This answer so confused poor Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it.

'They were learning to draw,' the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; 'and they drew all manner of things-everything that begins with an M -- '

'Why with an M?' said Alice.

'Why not?' said the March Hare.

Alice was silent.

11. When she got back to the Cheshire Cat, she was surprised to find quite a large crowd collected around it: there was a dispute going on between the executioner, the King, and the Queen, who were all talking at once, while all the rest were quite silent, and looked very uncomfortable.

The moment Alice appeared, she was appealed to by all three to settle the question, and they repeated their arguments to her, though, as they all spoke at once, she found it very hard to make out exactly what they said.

The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn't going to begin at his time of life. The King's argument was, that anything that had head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense.

The Queen's argument was, that if something wasn't done about it in less than no time, she'd have everybody executed, all round. (It was this last remark that had made the whole party look so grave and anxious.)

12. Alice was very glad to find her in such a pleasant temper, and thought to herself that perhaps it was only the pepper that had made her so savage when they met in the kitchen. 'When I'm a Duchess,' she said to herself (not in a very hopeful tone though), 'I won't have any pepper in my kitchen at all. Soup does very well without -- maybe it's always pepper that makes people hot-tempered,' she went on, very much pleased at having found out a new kind of rule, 'and vinegar that makes them sour -- and camomile that makes them bitter -- and -- and barley-sugar and such things that make children sweet-tempered. I only wish people knew that: then they wouldn't be so stingy about it, you know -- '

13. When we were little,' the Mock Turtle went on at last, more calmly, though still sobbing a little now and then, 'we went to school in the sea. The master was an old Turtle -we used to call him Tortoise-'

'Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?' Alice asked.

'We called him Tortoise because he taught us,' said the Mock Turtle angrily: 'really you are very dull!'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself for asking such a simple question,' added the Gryphon; and then they both sat silent and looked at poor Alice, who felt ready to sink into the earth. At last the Gryphon said to the Mock Turtle, 'Drive on, old fellow! Don't be all day about it!' and he went on in these words.

'Yes, we went to school in the sea, though you mayn't believe it -- '

'I never said I didn't!' interrupted Alice.

'You did,' said the Mock Turtle.

'Hold your tongue!' added the Gryphon, before Alice could speak again. The Mock Turtle went on: --

'We had the best of educations -- in fact, we went to school every day -- '

'I've been to a day-school, too,' said Alice; 'you needn't be so proud as all that.'

'With extras?' asked the Mock Turtle a little anxiously.

'Yes,' said Alice, 'we learned French and music.'

'And washing?' said the Mock Turtle.

'Certainly not!' said Alice indignantly.

‘Ah! then yours wasn't a really good school ‘ said the Mock Turtle in a tone of great relief. ‘Now at ours they had at the end of the bill ‘French, music, and washing -- extra.’ ‘

‘You couldn't have wanted it much,’ said Alice; ‘living at the bottom of the sea.’

‘I couldn't afford to learn it,’ said the Mock Turtle with a sigh. ‘I only took the regular course.’

‘What was that?’ inquired Alice.

‘Reeling and Writhing, of course, to begin with,’ the Mock Turtle replied; ‘and then the different branches of Arithmetic -- Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision.’

‘I never heard of ‘Uglification,’ ‘ Alice ventured to say. ‘What is it?’

The Gryphon lifted up both its paws in surprise, ‘What! Never heard of uglifying!’ it exclaimed. ‘You know what to beautify is, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ said Alice doubtfully: ‘it means -- to -- make -- anything -- prettier.’

‘Well, then,’ the Gryphon went on, ‘if you don't know what to uglify is, you must be a simpleton.’

Alice did not feel encouraged to ask any more questions about it, so she turned to the Mock Turtle, and said, ‘What else had you to learn?’

‘Well, there was Mystery,’ the Mock Turtle replied, counting off the subjects on his flappers, ‘ -- Mystery, ancient and modern, with Seaography : then Drawling -- the Drawling-master was an old conger-eel, that used to come once a week: he taught us Drawling, Stretching, and Fainting in Coils.’

‘What was that like?’ said Alice.

‘Well, I can't show it you myself,’ the Mock Turtle said: ‘I'm too stiff. And the Gryphon never learnt it.’

‘Hadn't time,’ said the Gryphon: ‘I went to the Classical master, though. He was an old crab, he was.’

‘I never went to him,’ the Mock Turtle said with a sigh: ‘he taught Laughing and Grief, they used to say’

‘So he did, so he did,’ said the Gryphon, sighing in his turn; and both creatures hid their faces in their paws.

‘And how many hours a day did you do lessons?’ said Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.

‘Ten hours the first day,’ said the Mock Turtle: ‘nine the next, and so on.’

‘What a curious plan!’ exclaimed Alice.

‘That's the reason they're called lessons,’ the Gryphon remarked: ‘because they lessen from day to day.’

14. No, no!’ said the Queen. ‘Sentence first -- verdict afterwards.’

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ said Alice loudly. ‘The idea of having the sentence first!’

‘Hold your tongue!’ said the Queen, turning purple.

‘I won't!’ said Alice.

‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

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

15. CLOSING DOWN POSSIBILITIES- RE-ENTERING THE ADULT WORLD

But her sister sat still just as she left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion, and this was her dream: -- [...]

The long grass rustled at her feet as the White Rabbit hurried by -- the frightened Mouse splashed his way through the neighbouring pool -- she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friends shared their never-ending meal, and the shrill voice of the Queen ordering off her unfortunate guests to execution -- once more the pig-baby was sneezing on the Duchess' knee, while plates and dishes crashed around it -- once more the shriek of the Gryphon, the squeaking of the Lizard's slate-pencil, and the choking of the suppressed guinea-pigs, filled the air, mixed up with the distant sobs of the miserable Mock Turtle.

So she sat on with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality -- the grass would be only rustling in the wind, and the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds -- the rattling teacups would change to the tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen's shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy -- and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all the other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard -- while the lowing of the cattle in the distance would take the place of the Mock Turtle's heavy sobs.