

Through the Looking Glass : Where Alice Finds Herself

Umesh Bansal

Guest Faculty
University of Delhi

Abstract

The present paper attempts to take a look at the search of self and identity by the protagonist Alice of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. This search involves her interactions with the fantastical characters she meets on the other side of the looking glass. Her journey as a pawn to a queen is not really linear or straight-forward but is rather complicated by the fact that she has a reasoning power and is not unilaterally influenced by the characters she encounters in the other world. Still, she matures as a "queen" or an adult only through this interaction.

Key Words: Self, identity, search, journey, maturation, adulthood

Through the Looking Glass, the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll presents us with a fantasy world where animals speak and reason, magical happenings take place and normal rules of logic do not apply. While in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice falls through a rabbit hole, in the sequel, she steps into the magical world which lies on the other side of the mirror. Her journey beyond the mirror involves her transformation into a Queen at the end.

Thus a seven year old girl attains adulthood through an elaborate process of self-discovery and identity formation. In this respect, it is not very different from a bildungsroman. A bildungsroman, as explained by M.H. Abrams is a "...novel of formation" or "novel of education." The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood through a spiritual crisis – into maturity; this process usually involves

recognition of one's identity and role into the world" (Abrams, 255).

It's not always easy to take Alice as a little child of seven years, considering that she often argues at the logical level of an adolescent and sometimes even that of an adult. However, nothing is amiss in such a depiction since in search of her identity, Alice is quite experimental and role-playing a young adult.

The Victorian concept of childhood and adulthood was quite different from what had been held previously. Before the medieval periods, children were considered as small adults (Aries 31) and it was only in the thirteenth century that there were a few depictions of children similar to those in the modern times (Aries 32). In the Victorian England, when *Through the Looking Glass* was brought out, childhood had acquired a "privileged age and a particular division of human life" (Aries 29).

Throughout the text, Alice is treated as a child and her childlike qualities have been emphasized upon. Even so, Alice is not a typical seven year old child accepting everything she encounters at face value. According to Nina Auerbach, "Victorian concept of the child tended to swing back and forth between the extremes of original innocence and original sin; Rousseau and Calvin stood side by side in the nursery" (42).

What is of crucial interest is how Alice acquires the knowledge of the self through her interactions with the denizens of the magical world on the other side of the looking glass. The looking-glass self theory of Cooley is quite helpful in understanding how an individual forms an opinion of his or her own self by looking at the opinions of others about him or her in society (Cooley 183-184). The "other" thus determines the identity of the individual. However, Carroll tends to problematize a linear and straightforward process of the formation of the Self by the individual by making Alice continually question and distrust the characters she encounters in the looking glass.

Harold Bloom opines, "It is a truism of criticism to remark that the child Alice is considerably more mature than any of the inhabitants of Wonderland." (3). However, that is not to say that Alice does not learn from interacting with the strange inhabitants in both the Alice books.

It is not easy to avoid the glare of mirrors others hold up to an individual, still, introspection or looking behind one's internal mirror is the only way to counter one's impression of what others think. Rather than an epiphany, this is a gradual learning process.

Alice's progression of her intellectual and emotional journey through her interaction with others in the fantastical world helps her form her own identity. During this journey she takes control of the situation she finds herself in whereas the adult representatives try to create chaos. She does get influenced by others in the process of the formation of her identity but takes in those influences with a pinch of salt.

Innocence is forced upon Alice by the societal expectations of her pliant behaviour which is characteristic of a Victorian girl. However, towards the end of the story, Alice gains independence by putting the Red King in check.

Alice breaks the illusion and turns upon the Queen whom she holds to be the cause of all mischief. The Red Queen had guided Alice to become Queen herself, but her manipulation of Alice as a pawn was undesirable. She has come to the end of her patience after undergoing manipulations and being dictated to.

"I can't stand this any more," Alice cries, as she seizes the tablecloth and hurls the entire setting into chaos (Carroll, 238). Catching hold of the Red Queen, Alice gives her a good shaking, until the rigid contours of the Queen become fuzzy and soft. The dream breaks and she realises that she is shaking the kitten. Alice had been informed earlier that according to the rules of chess a pawn may become a queen if she makes it to the other side. The transformation of a pawn to queen is in the tradition of the fairy tale convention in which an ordinary poor girl wins the heart of

a prince and marries him.

Alice's independence, however, is marred by the fact that she has had to play by the rules of the game, which may not be entirely logical and she is still controlled by the omniscient author and the societal expectations of her to become a queen.

Alice steps into the looking glass only to find out that she stands all by herself, completely alone, in spite of the fact that a few kindred souls such as the White Knight mean well to her. It is she herself who has to discover her self. She realises, "It's a great huge game of chess that's being played - all over the world." (Carroll, 144). Whether she likes it or not, her life will unfold itself before her. What path her life will take is influenced by forces other than her own will. Alice has little control over herself becoming a queen. This metaphorically symbolizes that she has no control over her inevitable adulthood and maturation.

Even young children could play card games and other simple games but chess belonged to the realm of grown ups. Alice is very excited to play this adult game full of potentialities:

‘I declare it’s marked out just like a large chessboard!’ Alice said at last. ‘There ought to be some men moving about somewhere— and so there are!’ She added in a tone of delight, and her heart began to beat quick with excitement as she went on. ‘It’s a great huge game of chess that’s being played— all over the world— if this is the world at all, you know. Oh, what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn’t mind being a Pawn, if only I might join— though of course I should *like* to be a Queen, best.’

She glanced rather shyly at the real Queen as she said this, but her companion only smiled pleasantly, and said, ‘That’s easily managed.’ (Carroll, 144)

That's easily managed simply because not to play the game and not to get transformed in order to become maturer is not an option. Whether one becomes a queen in the game of life or is still

controlled by others, one has to make certain choices and has to interact with others in order to become a new self.

Events such as the mysterious train ride and her rescue by the White Knight suggest that life is pre-determined and pre-ordained by some unseen force. In spite of this, Alice asserts her will: "She made up her mind to go on: 'for I certainly won't go *back*' she thought to herself" (Carroll, 155). For this was the only way to the Eighth square and her queening.

She is determined in spite of the existential question she faces : "And now, who am I? I *will* remember, if I can! I'm determined to do it!' But being determined didn't help much, and all she could say, after a great deal of puzzling, was, 'L, I *know* it begins with L!' " (Carroll, 156).

The train imagery in Chap. 3 serves to emphasize the unstoppable forward motion that dictates Alice's journey toward adulthood. Alice's forward movement as a pawn in the game of chess also underscores the irreversible nature of the process of maturation.

Throughout the story, Alice is inflicted with a sense of loneliness. Before stepping into the looking glass world, her only companions are cats to whom she talks as if they are humans. In the Looking-glass world she is treated rudely by the flowers, and Humpty Dumpty. The Queen is also rough on her. The only character who is compassionate to her is the White Knight, but he also has to leave her when she reaches the eighth square. No doubt, the process of growing up is a lonely process which an individual has to undertake himself or herself.

The looking glass into which Alice steps into is in fact society itself which tries to mould Alice into a conventional adult. The process however, is not always so linear and is rather complicated by the fact that the individual also has a will or ego of her own.

Alice's mind is not a tabula rasa which might be the case with a new-born. She can judge things based on her experiences she already has had. The process of growing up involves taking the opinions of others with a pinch of salt, to assess them on the basis of one's intelligence

and past knowledge. The maturer Alice is more cautious about the opinion of others than the child she once was. She likes to weigh and assess it before accepting it. She hardly ever accepts anything blindly. In this respect, she behaves more adult-like than childlike.

Alice's assumptions of how the adult world functions are constantly challenged by the weird rules of the looking glass world. Cakes are passed out before being cut, one reaches destination by walking in the opposite direction, outcome precedes events. She is completely immersed in this new environment so that she can learn about the "weird" ways of the world. At the same time, it is to be kept in mind that not all characters of the looking-glass world behave in the same way.

One strange character whom Alice considers as the most unsatisfactory of all characters is Humpty Dumpty. His use of language is peculiar and it seems to be a direct comment on the pedantic style and hair splitting practised by the intellectuals of the day:

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory,”’ Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t— till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knockdown argument for you!”’ ‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument,”’ Alice objected. ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean— neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master - - that’s all.’ (Carroll,190)

Alice is hardly impressed by this creature. What she learns is, however, invaluable for her since now she knows how the real world functions, how language becomes a tool to say deliberately one thing when someone wants to hold back something else.

Carroll was well known to enjoy the company of young girls of Alice's age. Whether or not he was a paedophile cannot be said with certainty but it is clear that he started to lose interest

in girls after they crossed a certain age. Humpty Dumpty seems to voice his thoughts here:

'Seven years and six months!' Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. 'An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked *my* advice, I'd have said "Leave off at seven"—but it's too late now.' 'I never ask advice about growing,' Alice said indignantly. 'Too proud?' the other inquired. Alice felt even more indignant at this suggestion. 'I mean,' she said, 'that one can't help growing older.' (Carroll, 188)

When Alice tells Humpty Dumpty, "One can't help growing older" (188), she is only suggesting that there is no choice in this matter. One has to become maturer as it is the rule of the world. Besides, like most children, she cannot wait to grow as an adult. This is what is supposed to give her freedom and be her own master. She is not impressed by his childish talk and finds that he is rather an unsatisfactory role model:

"Of all the unsatisfactory," (she repeated this aloud, as it was a great comfort to have such a long word to say) "of all the unsatisfactory people I *ever* met - " (Carroll, 197).

He offer an image of permanent imprisonment whereas Alice in a later chapter declares, "I don't want to be anybody's prisoner. I want to be a Queen" (Carroll, 211).

The real turn comes when Alice meets Tweedledum and Tweedledee who tell Alice that she is only a part of the Red King's dream, which implies that Looking-Glass world is not a construction of Alice's dream. This also means that she has no identity or agency of her own except what she has been allowed to do in the dream. This idea that a giant or God is dreaming the universe and we all are just imagination of Him, was propounded by Bishop Berkeley, a philosopher who was a contemporary of Lewis Carroll.

Towards the end of the story, Alice is wondering "which dreamed it ?" She says, "it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course— but then I was part of his dream, too!" (Carroll, 244).

She is not sure what has happened – whether she had dreamed or was herself a part of someone else's dream. No answer has been provided to this great philosophical question. Such questions are not normally put forward by children but rather by adults. This signifies that Alice has arrived, that she has really become maturer. Moreover, the maturing itself may be considered to be a dream or illusion since the "self" with which a person identifies with remains the same from childhood to adulthood.

This also suggests that there may not be any fixed reality after all. The nonchalance with which Alice takes this issue is what makes her maturer.

Alice's journey as a pawn to a queen thus provides her with experiences that help her ponder over the reality of the world and achieve her own self-image or identity. She considers what others have to say to her but she also has her own opinions and logic. So it is not simply a one-way influence on her of the fantastical characters she meets on the other side of the looking glass but something she absorbs and interact with as an experiential and rational being.

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