Returning to Wonderland

Utopian and Carnivalesque Nostalgia in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass

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ABSTRACT

This essay claims that the novels *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* triggers nostalgia in the contemporary reader. Nostalgia is a powerful and complex feeling which, in contemporary times, is triggered by a longing for a lost childhood. This essay connects that longing with the novels about Alice. I argue that the nostalgic experience in the *Alice in Wonderland* books combines utopia and Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and brings it into the lost childhood. The utopian part strives for something better while the carnivalesque part is an upheaval of daily life. This essay illustrates how utopia and carnival are related to a childhood free of adulthood anxieties and that they are a part of *Alice in Wonderland*, which triggers nostalgia in the adult reader.
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INTRODUCTION

Even though there have been studies made about children’s literature from the Golden Age\(^1\) and their nostalgic effect, many studies have not included Lewis Carroll’s stories about young Alice. The stories, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*\(^2\), might not at a first glance appear as nostalgic as other children’s literature from the Golden Age, which were often pastoral and tried to embody Eden as a childhood place. The reason could be because *Alice in Wonderland* has a darker tone to it. Nevertheless, I want to argue that for the reader of the twenty-first century the stories are nostalgic because they try to recreate a childhood free of adulthood anxieties. The nostalgia in Alice is unique since it is triggered by the use of both utopian imagery and ideas and the carnivalesque overturning of daily life. It integrates darkness and disorder with the longing for something better and places this longing in the lost childhood.

The two stories feature a young girl who is tired of adults always scolding her and telling her how to act and what to say. She therefore finds an escape in Wonderland. The reader walks into a peculiar land where rabbits use clocks and where unbbirthdays are celebrated (Carroll 185). The reader can remember how she too, as a child, could be completely mesmerized by a cat instead of accepting it for what the “adult” world had made it into. Time stands still in *Alice in Wonderland*, helping the reader return to their lost childhood again and again. The land Lewis created is not only a land where everything is different from the ordinary. It is also a land where everything is possible.

This essay will use utopia and the concept of carnival described by Mikhail Bakhtin as an overturning of daily life (11). Carnival embodies a space free from the hardship of the outside world while it stresses that we are always on the edge of losing that free space (xxi). The innocent world of childhood is not protected from everything, it can be broken down. I

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\(^1\)The Golden Age of British children’s literature lasted from 1860 to 1920.
\(^2\)When I hereafter talk about both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* I will refer to them as *Alice in Wonderland*. 
have chosen to use Gregory Claeys as my main source for utopia. The reason for this is that in *Searching for Utopia* Claeys aims to prove how it takes on different forms and cannot be limited to one or two things. Therefore I want to argue that Wonderland could be a utopia since the traditional Garden of Eden is not the only utopian dream which exists.

The adult reader may feel that the present-day does not contain everything she wishes for but are instead filled with chores and musts. By reading *Alice in Wonderland*, a longing for the carefree childhood days can be intensified. In her paper “Time, Subjectivity, and Modernism in E. Nesbit's Children's Fiction” Susan Anderson argues that “[i]n simultaneously addressing adult and child readers, the texts emphasize the gap between them, evoking the sense of an irrevocable loss of a childhood space of pleasure and freedom” (310).

In tests made by Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides and Wildschut in their paper “Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions” they show how the nostalgic experience does not differ too much between genders (979). The nostalgic experiences gained from *Alice in Wonderland* do not need gender specification. Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser also advocate the gender neutral way of analyzing literature. Iser argues in *The Implied Reader* that it is neither the reader nor the text in itself which is of importance, but a combination of them. The reader and her background is not of the greatest importance for studying a text, it is when the text and the reader come together which matters (276). Fish proclaims in *Interpreting the Variorum* that readers, both male and female, who all have grown up in a Western society and have similar interpretive strategies are likely to interpret texts in a similar fashion (483). The interpretive communities³ often help the reader create an opinion which is similar to how others would react. Consequently, how Fish and Iser use reader-response will be one of the methods for

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³The interpretive communities are a theoretical concept coined by Stanley Fish and explained in *Interpreting the Variorum*. Fish explains how these interpretive communities is the reason for us interpreting texts in different ways. We are colored by where we grew up and how we were raised and many other factors which makes up our communities.
analyzing the texts instead of using a contextual reading. Therefore I use my own perspective as a representative of young adult readers of the twenty-first century from the West.

The analysis will be of both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. First, I will define nostalgia. Secondly, I will look at how nostalgia is perceived in children’s literature. Then I will explain carnival and utopia and how they belong in nostalgia. Hence, when all of these parts are clarified they will be implanted on Alice and her underground world.

**PAST AND PRESENT NOSTALGIA**

Nostalgia was coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer (Boym 3) and from the beginning mostly connected with homesickness. People associated it with negative emotions and feelings. Jean Starobinski talks about the history of nostalgia in *The idea of Nostalgia* and explains how “[a]t the end of the eighteenth century people began to be fearful of extended sojourns away from home because they had become conscious of the threat posed by nostalgia” (86). It became known as a disease, something which crippled people. However, in the later centuries the negative feelings were no longer the only feelings connected to nostalgia. Nostalgia can conjure both negative and positive emotions, even though in modern times the positive ones overshadow the negative ones, as explained by several tests made by Arndt et al. (981).

For a long time, nostalgia was something men experienced and women did not undergo, as Fred Davis talks about in his book *Yearning for Yesterday* (55). This was because women did not work, did not perform military service or traveled to the same extent as men did. In contemporary times women are as prone as men to do these things. This is why nostalgic experience is not based on gender per se but instead on the relationship to the home and how different societies see gender roles (56).
In modern society, people are not as bound to one place as they were during the eighteenth century. People are able to travel and receive new information at a much faster pace. Nostalgia has thus become a temporal issue instead of being a spatial issue. Even though people might long for specific places, it is when they long for the places of their childhood that it triggers nostalgia. The contemporary person longs for a specific time. Nostalgia is the longing for a home which is both physical and spiritual, as Svetlana Boym states in *The Future of Nostalgia* (8). “Encountering silence,” Boym writes, "he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them” (8). Boym proposes that the nostalgic memory is a selective memory; people omit and change their memories of their past for a more nostalgic effect. Even though there might have been troubles and problems in the nostalgic person’s lost childhood, the nostalgic ignores those parts of their past and highlights the pleasant ones for a more nostalgic experience.

Nostalgia is a longing for a past time and, most specifically, a longing for a lost childhood. Aaron Santesso writes in *A Careful Longing* how some people had a need to return to the simpler, happier world of their childhood instead of staying in the urban environs of their adult life (43). Claudia Nelson also talks about this desire for the reader, to return to her childhood, in *Precocious Children and Childish Adults*. She writes about “[t]he adult writer and reader for whom childhood signifies escape from the pressures of a modern, industrialized, polluted, and exploitative adult world” (52). This escape is not a physical but an emotional return to the reader’s past. The nostalgic reader, Starobinski argues, does not actually want to return to the place of one’s childhood but to childhood itself (94). In other words, nostalgia is a function of the imagination, drenched in temporal longing, and the illusive object of that longing is the lost childhood.

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*Svetlana Boym uses the pronoun “he” as a way to address the nostalgic person (8). It is not used here for a specific person, instead it is used more general to describe the nostalgic person.*
There has to be a change for there to be nostalgic experiences. According to Karin Johannisson and explained in [Nostalgia – En Känslas Historia] (Nostalgia – A History of an Emotion), many people are shocked when realizing that the adult life is not as they imagined when they were younger. This creates confusion in people and can make the contemporary person want to avoid the future and instead want to create a safe space in the past (150). People focus on subjective time, and this resistance to clock time becomes nostalgic. The subjective time is often located in the nostalgic person’s childhood.

Even though very personal feelings arise from nostalgic experiences, it is not uncommon that contemporary people react to very similar things, be it objects or actions (Starobinski 103). Nostalgic experience can be produced. Therefore, even if a specific toy conjures special emotions for the person connected to the toy, the same toy can be made to convey the similar kind of feelings or memories for other adults who share no special bond to it (Johannisson 16). Many different types of people will therefore react to the same action or object; it is not limited. Seeing that some grew up in a family with two parents, others with just one, some grew up rich and others poor, nostalgia has to be able to play on all of these different kinds of people’s emotions.

Music, scents, dialects and different objects are some properties that make people feel nostalgic, as Johannisson explains (145). Photographs are experienced through sight. At the same time people can touch the picture to trigger more emotions. Photographs of for example events, animals and people who are not a part of one’s life in the present, represent a past time which is forever the same and that we in turn have changed (149).

Literature can also be used to trigger nostalgia. In modern society there are many people who experience identity crises and have a need for that which is consistent. Literature can be used to play on the emotions that arise. The nostalgic feeling that arises from literature can derive from both something abstract and concrete. A book can make a reader remember her
own childhood and joyful events, even though the author does not portrait that specific reader’s lost childhood. Boym talks about how poets such as Baudelaire wrote to create nostalgic memories (22). Robert Hemmings says in his essay “A Taste of Nostalgia: Children’s Books from the Golden Age - Carroll, Grahame, and Milne” that authors from the Golden age of children’s literature embodied the idea of the longing for a lost childhood (57).

**NOSTALGIA IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

For the modern adult reader, children’s literature can help reflect the longing for a lost time, as Anderson argues (310). The stories about Alice were written in the Victorian age. In “Childhood and Twentieth-Century Children’s Literature” Fay Sampson explains the Victorian age as a time when authors wanted to return to the glory of the past and back to old values. In literature they did so by writing about the rural idyll and enchanted lands while trying to remove or ignore that which belonged to the adult world (62-63). Nelson argues that the “fascination with childhood was echoed during the Victorian era by a corresponding interest in old age, often represented as an allied but possibly inferior state” (2). The “old age” was also referred to as a second childhood, wanting the innocence, beauty and boundless promise of the first (2). Consequently, it is not surprising that children’s literature had a lot of nostalgic references for adult readers.

If we consider nostalgic memory as a selective memory, (Boym xvi) the images produced by authors writing children’s literature does not need to be real. They play on the reader’s emotions and desire to reminisce about happier and simpler times. The modern adult reader can “reconstruct an imagined childhood,” Hemmings argues, “shaped by his own values, desires, and anxieties” (58-59). The adult reader often wants to create her own childhood which obscures parts of childhood which are not appealing to nostalgic memory, such as sexual desires.
The ambiguity of gender and race in children’s literature makes it easier for adult readers to feel nostalgic about a lost childhood as the reader is allowed to connect to any character (Sampson 63). An adventurous rabbit is something both boys and girls can easily feel connected to. If the character, on the other hand, is a brown-haired boy named Tom it might be easy for boys to connect to it, but it might be more difficult for girls to do the same. An example of a book with gender ambiguity is *Winnie the Pooh* where the animals are substitutions for human children. At the same time as the adult reader is able to distance herself, she is also able to connect to even more characters through the ambiguity. Since the characters are substitutions of children, it is a child’s world the reader enters.

**THE UTOPIAN DREAM**

I have explained how nostalgia is about creating and longing for something better, something that is missing in the present. Claeys explains how utopia is, among other things, the search for an ideal present, past and future and making them work together (7). This could be both temporal and spatial. The utopian paradise which is located in another time instead of a specific place is more important for the contemporary reader who is in search of an inner paradise and not an outer location.

Through time there have been several different famous utopias. One of the most known utopias in the Western world is the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2.1-3.24). It was a place where animals and humans all lived in harmony; there were no wars and no miseries. It was a place where everything was ideal. Another known utopia is the place of Valhalla which people who had died in battle reached. Every day they battled against the giants and every night they had a feast where they ate and drank as much as they could (Claeys 20). The utopian dream varies from different societies and times.

In the same way that people will never be able to reach Garden of Eden and Valhalla in this life, utopia is a search for that which people cannot acquire in their ordinary life. The
difference between these kinds of utopias and the present utopia is that utopia is no longer a location. The qualities described above, which make Garden of Eden and Valhalla into two different utopias, can be valid in the twenty-first century (Claeys 202). Utopia is an attempt to recapture something lost (129). Many people set out on quests to find that which they cannot gain in their present life. “We grasp out to retain what we have lost or are losing, for it is more certain than any future we can contemplate” (210). People have a need to search for something missing or lost. They might feel this would improve their lives. It is not uncommon that people feel like they, when they grow up, have lost a part of themselves. They are too occupied with being who society demands them to be that they forget who they wanted to be. This search is often a quest to regain the lost childhood. The childhood represents what adulthood is missing and so becomes a utopian dream.

As in the original Utopia written by Thomas More, a utopia can still contain starvation, violence and other kind of misfortunes. It does on the other hand endeavor to be better than the present and the ordinary (Claeys 59). For the Western reader it used to be a world that offered green meadows and food in abundance. The utopia which contemporary readers strive for is not the same as it used to be because, as Claeys describes it, we are not interested in being shepherds in modern times (202). The utopias we often strive for today are places where fragmentation, alienation and identity crises are only memories. Even if green meadows and food in abundance is appealing, in contemporary society the utopian dream is more about the inner self than the outer life. The inner self and the home without problems are often, as Johannison explains, a reconstructed childhood (148). We are unable to see anything good in the present, or the future, and therefore locate it in the past.

Since the lost childhood becomes a utopia, timelessness becomes important for utopia. In the lost childhood everything remains as it was. The lost childhood as a utopia can be compared to a mother’s womb, as Chris Ferns explains in Narrating Utopia (41). The
mother’s womb is a place of happiness and innocence and the child has always a plentiful supply of food and craves for nothing else (41). In the womb time stands still, and we are free from our hardships. There have been countless songs made about being young forever, about staying in a time when life was simpler and easier to enjoy. This timelessness of the lost childhood becomes nostalgic because we position the good parts of our lives in this past time.

**BAKHTIN’S CONCEPT OF CARNIVAL**

While utopia is about finding the ideal place and time, carnival is, as Bakhtin describes it in his book *Rabelais and His World*, about a place of deconstruction (10). Carnival and utopia are, on the other hand, both places that create and strive for that which is not a part of this world. No one can ever truly belong to either. Neither of them is, as Claeys defines it, “the domain of the impossible. In the land of myth, almost anything is possible” (15).

I have chosen to look at carnival the way Bakhtin describes it. His view on carnival is about the freedom of people and about something people long for, but it is not always able to attain in their ordinary life (15-16). Carnival could be interpreted as a return to one’s childhood since childish activities can liberate adults from their grown-up life. In carnival a “special form of free and familiar contract reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (10). The established authority is thrown out and replaced with freedom. The upheaval of the established society manifests itself in the feast of fools which was “a banquette for all the world” (279). It turned daily life upside-down. Kings dressed up as clowns and the clowns were in their turn dressed up as kings (197). The feast of fools was a way to explicitly show that class and status from the normal had nothing to do with carnival. It also was a place of noise and celebration. During the feast, people were seen as equals. The renewal and rebirth of people turned them into equals. Bakhtin even suggested that carnival is a unique kind of utopia (10).
Carnival has a need to destroy before it can create. "'Upward’ and ‘downward’ have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. ‘Downward’ is earth, ‘upward’ is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts)” (21). To be able to be free and create, people have to throw away and destroy all the things that hold onto and muzzle them. Carnival basically means that people need an outlet to be able to function in society. This outlet can for some people be found in childhood. Childhood represent something different from adulthood. If we define adulthood as something stable and as a time where people follow the unwritten rules laid out for them, childhood is the opposite. There are of course rules, but those rules are often made by adults and so do not construct childhood. A child is allowed to explore the world and turn it upside down in a way that adults are not able to do.

The jesters are an important part of carnival. They represent the carnival spirit and “a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time” (8). They had a strange way of behaving, always playing the part of the clowns and fools. They made the carnival life come alive so people could see something between life and art before their eyes. The jesters were meant to be free of the normal, and invite people to be a part of their reality.

Death and the grotesque are both a part of Bakhtin’s carnival, although he argues that it does not just bring darkness but instead creates and offers joy (19). Bakhtin explains how “[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style” (303). Like carnival, the grotesque form has in modern times transformed to something negative and Bakhtin claims that this was never the meaning of the grotesque. The grotesque and the “id”, as in the existentialist sense of the word, are often misinterpreted as sharing the same qualities. While the “id” is used to describe an alien power which controls human behavior and makes people ignore morality, the grotesque liberates people from all inhuman power. In carnival, the grotesque was used to “escape the false truth
of this world” in order to be able to look at the world with free eyes (49). The grotesque wishes not to be separated from the world, instead it wants to be a part of it. It is unfinished, forever changing and strives to be a part of the world as the world itself is never finished.

Death and abuse is often something negative. However, in carnival it is always followed by laughter and “merry times”. This creates a world which is not afraid of the darker parts of being human but embraces them and changes their meaning. Bakhtin explains time as something “which kills and gives birth, which allows nothing old to be perpetuated and never ceases to generate the new and the youthful” (211). Time is nothing to be distressed about. People are thus able to rejoice in darkness as it does not only consume but regenerates people.

Laughter is a kind of release for the carnival life. It is meant to degrade people, but in a way that builds them up into a newer and freer person. They would become someone who could look at their own body and see the comedy and the love while laughing with everyone instead of feeling ashamed. Carnival values laughter and recognizes the joy it brings. Laughter is never directed towards anyone. Even the ones laughing are the recipients. Laughter has no beginning or end; it only means to give joy. “Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority” (90). It was made to be universal and to celebrate life.

**UTOPIA AND CARNIVAL AND THEIR PLACE IN NOSTALGIA**

The question that remains is how utopia and carnival fit into this nostalgia which *Alice in Wonderland* triggers. I have found that, even though carnival and utopia might seem like they represent different things, they can both be connected to nostalgia and both are also applicable to *Alice in Wonderland*. First of all they both contain a timeless space which is filled with opportunities instead of restrictions. A utopia is a paradise one can dream about and long for. However, it is difficult to experience utopia more than in memories, pictures and stories. Utopia has to be a long distance relationship to stay a utopia. When the world
changes, people often dream of what was before and sees the past as a utopia, excluding bad memories and only focusing on what made it better than what the present is offering. Many adults have sometimes in their life spoken the phrase; “that was the good old days”. It is not surprising that people long for that which they held dear and have lost. This memory is often altered and not a pure and exact memory. Johannisson says that “[i]t is conservative in that sense that it turns its gaze to the idealizing pictures of the past. When the good is located to the past nostalgia turns into a utopia”\(^5\) (148). The past could represent childhood. If childhood is seen as the only good, it becomes a utopia and triggers nostalgia.

Just as with utopia, carnival can be connected with nostalgia and the lost childhood. Carnival, as Bakhtin sees it, gives people a way to release all that they need to hold inside of them in their everyday life (49). If we consider nostalgia and the lost childhood to be connected it can be described as a release from adulthood. People are drawn to the lost childhood, and to carnival, because they offer something different than “the pressures of a modern, industrialized, polluted, and exploitative adult world” (Nelson 52). Nostalgia and carnival both contain a longing for a place where the troubles of the daily, adult life is excluded. It becomes an escape into another time. Bakhtin explains how, for example, the feast of fools was made to be an outlet for our second nature, the one of foolishness. People need to return to this free space from time to time so they are able to fully commit to the present (75). The nature of foolishness has many similarities with childhood. Childhood is very different from adulthood because it does not follow the same rules. Childhood and carnival both breaks the norms of adulthood. It is a place of rebirth into something different from the normal. Carnival has no need to be normal; it wants to turn established hierarchies upside down.

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\(^5\)My translation.
ALICE AND THE NOSTALGIC EXPERIENCES OF THE MODERN READER

I have described the concept of nostalgia and connected it to utopia and carnival and will now discuss how the books about Alice contain elements which, for the modern adult reader, trigger nostalgia in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass.

It all begins with young Alice being bored. She does not like the adult world which is forced upon her with books without pictures and punishments. She escapes by chasing a rabbit and falling down a rabbit hole. The different events that then follow seem to be connected by the strangest coincidences. For example, in the “pool of tears” Alice shrinks, and in her own pool of tears swims out to Wonderland. Everything and anything is possible.

Utopia in Alice

The world which Alice falls down into might not be something a reader would call a utopia since Wonderland, at a first glance, has more similarities to carnival. Bakhtin writes how carnival is a kind of utopia (10). They both share qualities. These qualities are, for instance, timelessness and a longing for something the present-day cannot give the reader.

My statement is that Wonderland is a utopia even though the utopian land which Lewis Carroll created is more a return into oneself than the traditional utopian land described in books from the Golden Age. Therefore the Alice in Wonderland books are nostalgic since nostalgia has changed from an outer to an inner utopia (Claeys 211). The world Alice visits could be an Eden of the reader’s childhood, of the reader’s dreams and wonders. It is a place where the adulthood worries and troubles are far away. In the same way as utopia is a reconstruction of something better, is the nostalgic picture of childhood, an adult reconstruction more than the real childhood.

Much as when Fern talks about utopia, the mother’s womb and timelessness, these things are parts of Wonderland. It is a land with many characters that are unable to perceive, or choose to refuse, clock time. Instead they live in a land with subjective time. The Mad
Hatter, for example, believes time can be changed to one’s own needs so that it, for instance, can always be tea time. Mark W. Westmoreland states in the beginning of his essay “Wishing it were some other time: the temporal passage of Alice” that The Mad hatter has no need for time as others do (167). The Mad Hatter is a representation of how a reader when experiencing nostalgia wants to revisit a lost space and rejects the clock time.

I believe the modern reader sometimes feels an urge to escape inside of time, taking parts from the past and modifying them to create a safe space. It is often their own childhood. Johannisson writes about the present, how it is “a society characterized by multi clarity, unclear structures and repealed timelines.... A lot of people are unable to see the future and therefore take refuge in the past” (150). The Mad Hatter tries to bring his tea time with him wherever he goes. He says in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, “I beg pardon, your majesty for bringing these in; but I hadn’t quite finished my tea when I was sent for” (96). This notion of “tea time” is brought up many times in both books, and the reader can take refuge in that time stands still in Carroll’s stories and want to return to that space again and again.

The reader is never truly able to pinpoint the age of any of the characters. Alice is described as a seven-year-old child, but she sometimes seems to know more about life than a child her age normally does. When she meets Tweedledum and Tweedledee she is very much the adult compared to them:

“I’m afraid he’ll catch a cold with lying on the damp grass” . . . He shouted so loud that Alice couldn’t help saying “Hush! You’ll be waking him, I’m afraid, if you make so much noise”. . . Alice laid her hand upon his arm, and said, in a soothing tone, “You needn’t be so angry about and old rattle.” (Carroll 164-166)

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6My translation.
This picture is from chapter four in *Through the Looking-Glass* and in it we see how Alice is helping Tweedledum and Tweedledee dress. Alice does not want them getting hurt and so helps them with their outfits. She shifts between a child and an adult throughout the stories.

Fig. 1. Alice Dressing Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

The reader is unable to assign a specific age to Alice. She becomes timeless.

Alice might be the only real human child in Wonderland, but all of the characters share some childlike qualities. Sampson proclaims that some children’s books give the reader the possibility to choose whom she or he wants “to empathize with in order to live out personal dreams” (63). The characters from *Alice in Wonderland* do not portray the perfect citizens. They are flawed. Even so, they carry something which the reader can connect to. They could therefore represent children. Children are growing and unfinished, and so is also utopia.

Children appeal to the adult reader’s emotions in the same way as other young’s do. Children are unfinished and growing, and they lack certain qualities like morality which often show itself in ruthless egoism (Hemmings 70). The stories about Alice do not wish to hide the fact that children share the same qualities as adults. Lewis Carroll shines light upon it, and because children help convey nostalgia for the adult reader this can pass through without evoking bad emotions. Carroll writes about death in almost every chapter of *Alice in Wonderland*, but always speaks of it without fear. Even if Alice talks about how her cat Dinah is a master of catching and killing rodents and passerines and while the Queen of Hearts is always demanding everyone to be beheaded, no one in Wonderland ever dies or is executed. Santesso talks about how children in literature go on their days “irregardless of their doom” (72). Likewise, the adult reader is aware of the dangers of being executed or that if you are an
egg you should not sit high up on a ledge, as Humpty Dumpty does, because you could fall
down and die (Carroll 181). However, the characters are not aware of these dangers, or maybe
they see nothing good coming from worrying about bad things that could happen. The reader
is allowed to read about these happenings without worrying about anyone ever dying.

Adventures are both an important part of utopia and the stories about Alice. Alice is
very eager to look for new places and has no fear of diving into something unknown. She only
feels that her adventures will give her something better than the days she has with her family,
who scold her and only read books without pictures. From the beginning of Alice’s
Adventures in Wonderland, Alice is searching for the beautiful garden she saw through the
keyhole in chapter one. Alice wants to “wander among those beds of bright flowers and those
cool fountains” (12). Utopia is about searching for an idyll and many pilgrims and explorers
do this. They leave the ordinary for hopes of something better.

The landscape which Alice happens upon in the beginning of Through the Looking-
Glass is a garden with many different kinds of flowers which talk and sing (136). The
landscape is bright. It is enriched by trees and grass, and everyone seems free to walk
wherever they choose and talk to whoever they want. The reader might even feel a safe space
in the forest, even though Alice is sometimes scared of it. The reader can learn about how
there are no dangers in the forest. The dangers are only from a child’s imagination. Alice
hears a strange sound and asks if there are lions or tigers in the forest, but it turns out to be the
Red King who is snoring (164). The landscape as a utopia is fortified by the original pictures
drawn by John Tenniel. The pictures are of lakes, flowers and trees which seem undisturbed
by the ruckus the characters sometimes make.

In the end of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland Alice returns to her sister’s lap, and is
told to go back home. Her sister is now the one day-dreaming about Wonderland. The reader
gets a feeling that it was not scary at all. Alice will in the future be able to tell her own
children about the happy summer-day she had. There are no thoughts about the beheading or the rude conversations, only joyous memories from that dream (Carroll 109-110). The last part of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland could therefore possibly be directed towards adults instead of towards children. It helps the reader reenter the soothing nostalgic state and only remember the utopian parts when closing the book.

Carnival in Alice

In Carnival madness roams free and liberates people from the ordinary. It is not a soothing utopia. Wonderland is notably a land of madness. The Cheshire cat confirms the madness when it says to Alice: “We’re all mad here. I’m mad, you’re mad” (Carroll57). The madness that everyone seems to be a part of is not seen as something negative by the characters of Wonderland.

The reader can read about Alice meeting many odd creatures and how they interact but seldom frighten her. Since Alice seldom panics or laments over her dire situation, the reader can enjoy Alice’s encounters, instead of feeling horrified, which Charles Taliaferro and Elizabeth Olson discuss in their essay “Serious Nonsense” (189). If Alice had been scared and trembling, the story would be more morbid. However, Alice is able to see the world from an intrigued child’s eyes instead of a cynical adult’s eyes. The grotesque becomes amusing.

The jesters are the fools and clowns of carnival, as Bakhtin explains (8). While Alice tries to make sense of Wonderland the other characters take on the role of the jesters. However, when Alice acts like a child she is very similar to the other characters, who say what pop into their minds because they want to share everything. The Mad Hatter, for
example, gives Alice the riddle “why is a raven like a writing-desk” (Carroll 60) without having any idea himself what the answer could be. Most of the characters can be connected to jesters just by the language they use and their appearances; such as the footman with the head of a fish, or the knight who falls of his steed ever so often. The jesters of Wonderland are more similar to children than adults. They represent a world which can only be obtained by rejecting the adult world. While adults are “forced” to think before they speak and behave in a good manner, children are allowed to be free.

Laughter is used to spread joy in carnival. Alice laughs at serious matters without thinking about the consequences. She does not mean to be rude by laughing, only that what just happened was amusing. Often in the books, it is the Wonderland-creatures who represent carnival, but it is Alice who represents laughter. This is an extract from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland where the Rabbit and Alice converse about death:

“She’s under sentence of execution.”

“What for?” said Alice.

“Did you say ‘what a pity!’?” the Rabbit asked.

“No, I didn’t,” said Alice. “I don’t think it’s at all a pity. I said ‘What for?’”

“She boxed the Queen’s ears-” the rabbit began. Alice gave a little scream of laughter.

(Carroll 73)

Alice ignores the horrific fact about a woman being sentenced to death because of the funny reason for the sentence. The reader might interpret that Alice is able to focus on what makes the situation funny as a way to soften the way death is looked upon. That laughter in the books is never used to humiliate others can help the reader having an outlet for these situations which in normal life people are not allowed to laugh at. It also shows how
childhood is different from adulthood. The worries which adults are concerned about are not a part of either childhood or Wonderland. In both carnival and *Alice in Wonderland* it is difficult to determine where fear ends and joyous recreation begins. The reader is allowed to dive into a sea of possibilities, but is always on the edge of losing her magical land.

As in carnival where equality is of great importance, the reader can see how Alice is equal to everyone. She behaves like a child who does not know who she is allowed to converse with and in what manner she should speak. She expresses whatever she wants to the Queen of Hearts, a woman who has a tendency to want everyone that crosses her to be beheaded, as she does in the chapter “The Queen’s croquet-ground”:

> “How should I know?” said Alice, surprised at her own courage. “It’s no business of mine.”
> The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, began screaming “Off with her head! Off with----”
> “Nonsense!” said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent. (72)

The reader can herself feel the exchange between Alice and the other characters. Neither peasant nor Queen is out of limits for Alice and she even treats her kitten in *Through the Looking-Glass* as an equal, suggesting that Alice feels that no one is above or beneath her.

By reading the books about Alice, the modern reader can experience carnival and is allowed to enjoy the strange happenings while laughing at death, at others and at oneself.

**CONCLUSION**

The contemporary adult reader can feel nostalgic by reading Lewis Carroll’s novels about Alice through the concepts of utopia and carnival. For me, *Alice in Wonderland* can enrich the modern reader and make her feel like the world only offers opportunities, even
though there are hardships. As a result of clock time always being disobeyed by the characters, the reader can stay in childhood and does not have to fear dying. The adult reader is allowed to create her own reality. She can choose who to be, and do so without the pressures of the adult world and the troubles which belong to the adult world. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* describe an enchanting world the adult reader can return to.

Utopia and carnival both offers a timeless space marked by possibilities instead of restrictions. The concept of utopia is in contemporary times often a search for an inner paradise instead of an outer location. Both the inner paradise and the memories of childhood is often a subjective picture which, for a more nostalgic effect, omits undesired parts while adding that which the reader desires. Alice is searching for something better, something she does not feel her life is giving her. She creates her own utopia where time is nothing anyone bothers about and most everyday troubles are replaced with nonsense.

Wonderland is very clearly a carnival that turns the normal upside down. While this happens, the reader can also learn that this madness is nothing to fear. Alice is allowed to walk among the different characters, and laugh at them and also behave like them. The grotesque becomes amusing since Alice does not feel fear but instead are intrigued. Wonderland becomes an escape from the polluted adult world.

Wonderland portraits the darker elements of life in a way which is not frightful, instead it is comical and joyful. The reader can return to a magical space, which returns her to a time when talking cats is what to expect and food can make one shrink. It is a time of the reader’s childhood. It is not a childhood free from troubles, but free from the problems many adults have to deal with in their ordinary day and instead filled with nonsense.
WORKS CITED

PRIMARY TEXT

SECONDARY TEXTS


ILLUSTRATIONS CITED
