Teaching Guide:
Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Student Level: Year 5 and up

Learning Objectives
- Develop a deeper understanding of Lewis Carroll's core literary themes and preoccupations
- Engage with the genre of literary nonsense and explore the idea of language-play
- Develop a deeper understanding of the concept of satire and its literary uses
- Practice close reading
- Practice reading texts with the benefit of their cultural context and identifying specific cultural references

Readings to prepare outside of class: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is about 100-170 pages in most editions, with large print and frequent illustrations, divided into twelve chapters. Depending on the age and reading level of students, the book as a whole can be read over one to three weeks. A single class can focus on chapters 1-3, describing Alice's encounter with a variety of satirical animals immediately upon arriving in Wonderland, or chapters 7-8, featuring the text's most famous set-pieces, the Mad Hatter's tea party and the Queen's croquet game.

Teachers are encouraged to review Martin Gardner's notes in *The Annotated Alice* (full citation below) in order to walk students through Carroll's in-jokes during class discussion. More advanced students can read *The Annotated Alice* directly.

Narrative Summary of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
Seven-year-old Alice, sitting on the riverbank with her older sister, is feeling bored and drowsy when she sees a white rabbit wearing a waistcoat and pocket watch run past, saying 'I shall be late!' Alice follows the rabbit down a rabbit-hole under a hedge, and finds herself falling down a very deep well lined with cupboards and bookshelves. She lands in a hall lined with doors and finds a key to a tiny door, then a bottle labeled DRINK ME, which she drinks. She shrinks until she is ten inches high, then finds a cake labeled EAT ME, which she eats and then grows more than nine feet tall. She has an identity crisis, and discovers she can't remember things she used to know when she recites an incorrect (satirical) version of a Victorian poem. She becomes upset and begins crying, then shrinks again after picking up the White Rabbit's fan. She shrinks so much that she finds herself swimming in a pool of the vast tears she cried when she was nine feet tall. The sea of tears quickly becomes crowded with various animals and birds who have been swept away by the waters, including a Mouse, who is offended when Alice tries to speak to it in elementary French and asks *Où est ma chatte*? (Where is my cat?) Arriving on a riverbank, the animals discuss how to dry themselves off, and the Mouse offers a dry monologue on the history of the Norman Conquest. Eventually the animals

agree to dry off by having a ‘caucus-race’ (a joke about political caucuses). They all run around in circles, until the Dodo arbitrarily says the race is over and declares that everyone has won. After the Mouse has recited a rhyming tale printed on the page in the shape of a mouse tail, Alice scares all the animals away by talking about her cat.

The White Rabbit returns, speaking fearfully about someone called the Duchess. He mistakes Alice for his housemaid and sends her off to fetch his gloves and fan. Once inside his house, Alice drinks the contents of another little bottle, and suddenly grows so large she becomes stuck in the house. The Rabbit tries to get his servants, Bill (a lizard) and Pat, to help him get the ‘monster’ out of his house; Bill tries to climb down the chimney to get inside, and Alice kicks Bill back out of it, sending him soaring off. A crowd of animals arrive to gawk at her and throw pebbles, which turn into cakes; she eats one, shrinks, and escapes from the house. Upon entering the woods, she meets a caterpillar smoking a hookah, sitting on a mushroom. The caterpillar demands to know who she is, and Alice finds she’s confused about the answer, after all the size changes she’s been through. She makes another attempt to recite a poem, and again it comes out wrong. The caterpillar tells her that one side of his mushroom will make her shrink and the other will make her grow. She eats from the growth side, and this time her neck stretches so long that a pigeon mistakes her for a serpent. Alice shrinks herself again and stumbles upon the house of the Duchess, who is invited by the Queen to play croquet. The Duchess’ house is in chaos, with the cook throwing plates and making a soup that has so much pepper in it everyone in the house starts sneezing, including the Duchess’ howling baby. The Duchess thrusts the baby at Alice, who attempts to take care of it, but it turns into a pig.

Alice leaves the house and encounters the Duchess’ Cheshire Cat, which is sitting in a tree and grinning. The Cheshire Cat tells Alice that everyone in Wonderland (Cat and Alice included) is mad, and directs her towards the house of a March Hare. The March Hare and his neighbour the Hatter are having tea with a Dormouse, who is constantly falling asleep. The guests trade nonsensical insults, riddles, and songs. Alice leaves the tea party through a door in a tree and enters a lovely garden, where she finds living playing cards painting white roses red. They say the Queen of Hearts hates white roses, and will behead them if she discovers they have accidentally planted white roses instead of red. An entire court of playing cards arrives, led by the King and Queen of Hearts; the Queen sets about ordering various people to be executed, yelling ‘Off with their heads!’ Alice is recruited to play croquet with the Queen, but all the mallets are flamingos and the balls are hedgehogs. The game descends into chaos, including some long musings from the Duchess, finding morals in everything anyone says. Alice is eventually introduced to a Gryphon and a Mock Turtle by the Queen of Hearts; the Mock Turtle brags about the quality of the school he attended, in a mockery of posh Victorian educational practice. They dance the Lobster Quadrille, and Alice again asserts that she doesn’t know who she is and recites a poem incorrectly.

All three of them are summoned back to the playing card court for a trial, in which the Knave of Hearts is tried before a jury of animals for stealing the Queen’s tarts. Several witnesses, including the Hatter, give nonsensical testimony. Meanwhile, Alice has started growing again, and finds herself called to the witness box. She argues with the King and Queen about the arbitrary court proceedings, and the pack of cards starts to swarm her. At this point her sister wakes her up,

brushing a shower of leaves off her face. Alice tells her sister about the dream, then leaves her sister on the riverbank to think about the joys of Wonderland and its contrast with 'dull reality', and to imagine Alice growing up and using her memories of the Wonderland dream to stay connected to her childhood and to her children.

Discussion Questions

1. What's the relationship between Alice's dream and Alice's reality in this book? How does she move in and out of Wonderland, and what pieces of reality appear in the dream-world?
2. What are the 'adults' like in Wonderland, from the White Rabbit to the Queen of Hearts? How do these adults treat Alice, and why?
3. Alice encounters a lot of violence in Wonderland, though it's played exclusively for laughs and she always escapes unscathed. She also comments on how often she gets ordered about. Is this a commentary on what it's like to be a child? How does Alice navigate the obstacle course (and have fun while she's at it) of dealing with adults as a child? How does Wonderland show us the fun things about being a child and the disappointments and fears of childhood at the same time?
4. Are there any 'rules' in Wonderland? What kind of rules do characters tell Alice to follow? What kind of sense do they make?
5. Similarly, what are legal, courtly, and parliamentary proceedings like in Wonderland? How noble are the nobility? What do you think Carroll is making fun of here?
6. Alice also struggles with manners in Wonderland: she tries to be polite, but many of the creatures she encounters get offended by things she says or does. When does etiquette 'work' for Alice and when does it fail? What is Carroll saying about manners in *Wonderland*? What signs of class hierarchy in the text deserve our attention?
7. Carroll plays with language throughout *Wonderland*, making puns and twisting characters' words around. What are your favourite moments of language play in this book? Why are they fun or funny? What happens when characters get language 'wrong'? What does it mean that language is so slippery in this book — in what ways is that a good thing, and in what ways is that a dangerous thing?
8. Alice forgets all sorts of poems she's been meant to memorise in school, which gives Carroll the chance to insert fun parodies of well-known Victorian children's poems. Look up the original texts: 'How doth the little crocodile' is a parody of 'Against Idleness and Mischief'; 'You are old, Father William' is a parody of 'The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them'; 'Will you walk a little faster' is 'The Spider and the Fly'; and 'Tis the Voice of the Lobster' is a parody of 'The Sluggard'. How has Carroll changed these poems, and why? What do the originals have in common? What kind of fun is he having in his rewritten versions?
9. We meet a whole range of talking animals in Wonderland. Make a list of them, and pick two or three to focus on. What's funny about these animals, and why? Can you guess what or whom Carroll might be making fun of?
10. When the Cheshire Cat says 'We're all mad here… you must be, or you wouldn't have come', what does he mean? Do you agree with him?

11. Alice explains to several different characters she encounters that she's having an identity crisis: having changed size so many times, and forgotten so many things, she isn't sure who she is anymore. What kind of a metaphor might this be? How do we know and define who we are?
12. Why does the book end with Alice's sister?

Further Reading and Writing Exercises:

Nonsense Literature
Students should read Carroll's poem *The Jabberwocky*, meant to be a parody of Old and Middle English narrative verse. In small groups, students can discuss the following questions:

- What sentences can you make sense of, and why?
- What definitions can you come up with for Carroll's nonsense words? Are there fragments of real words you can find in them, starting with the first lines: ''Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / did gyre and gymble in the wabe'?
- How can we still read this poem and make sense of it when so many of the words are made up? How do we know 'brillig' is an adjective and 'gymble' is a verb?
- What kind of narrative can be found in this poem, and how do we follow it despite the strange words? Where does Carroll need to use English words we recognise in order for us to follow the story? Which crucial words are they?
- What does nonsense language tell us about our ability to take meaning from words?

Exercise A: Students should invent three nonsense words (a noun, an adjective, and a verb), using fragments of 'real' words in any language, and write a sentence with them. Invite students to guess the meanings of one another's words.

Exercise B: More advanced students can invent any number of words, and write an eight-line narrative poem using them. They should plot a simple narrative for their poem, and, as with *The Jabberwocky*, this general storyline should be clear to the reader. They should turn in the poem with a glossary of their invented words.

Exercise C: To elaborate on their engagement with nonsense literature, students can read Carroll's poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (the first Fitt is sufficient). Again, what words are recognisable to us, and which are not? What's the plot here? What tensions are there between the characters? Why doesn't the Baker remember his name? Why might a name be important in a nonsense poem? Why write a nonsense poem in the first place?

Satire in Wonderland
Throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll uses animals as tools of satire. Satire is the use of exaggerated humour to expose and criticise flaws and vices, especially in the context of contemporary cultural or political commentary. Carroll's stammering, ineffectual Dodo of Chapter 3 is meant to be a teasing portrait of himself, for example, while the White Rabbit is a middle-aged, middle-class social climber trying to get in with nobility.

Students should pick an animal — teachers can provide a list of potential options for inspiration, or give students free rein — and write two paragraphs describing a fantasy version of that animal, using their invented character to satirise something they find funny. For obvious reasons, students cannot write satires about

one another without express consent, and they cannot use their satire to make fun of someone's race, gender, ability, body type, sexual orientation, etc. Students should be encouraged to consider the following questions:

- What do you want to make fun of, and why? How can you convey what you're making fun of to your audience by showing rather than telling?
- Good satire 'punches up' rather than 'punching down'. What values are you trying to uphold in your satire, and what values are you trying to critique?
- What animal should you choose for your satire? What features of this animal (biological, like a tufted tail, or cultural, like the idea of foxes as intelligent) are useful to, or correspond with, features you'd like to make fun of in the real world?

Art and Wonderland

One of the most memorable things about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are John Tenniel's accompanying illustrations; Tenniel was hired by Carroll himself for the published editions of *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

Exercise A: Students can, individually or in small groups, pick their favourite illustration and answer the following questions:

- How does the image correspond with the text? What details in the picture come from the story, and what has Tenniel added or altered?
- How does Tenniel combine real-world and fantastical elements in the image? What is recognisable to us, and what is strange?
- How does Tenniel show us character and emotion? What are his faces like, and why?
- Is there anything interesting about where the image is on the page?

Exercise B: Younger students may enjoy creating a piece of art illustrating a moment in the text that Tenniel does not. They can present it to the class and explain what details from the text they have chosen to include, and why.

Resources for Teachers and Advanced Students

- Martin Gardner, ed. *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition* (W. W. Norton, 2000).
  - This book provides essential notes explaining the riddles, wordplay, and satirical references to contemporary culture in the Alice texts.
- Robin Wilson, *Lewis Carroll in Numberland: His Fantastical Mathematical Logical Life* (Penguin, 2009).
- Robert Douglas Fairhurst, *The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland* (Harvill Secker, 2015).
- Jenny Woolf, *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll: Discovering the Whimsical, Thoughtful, and Sometimes Lonely Man Who Created Alice in Wonderland* (Macmillan, 2011).
  - Content warning: note that the two books above discuss the allegations that Charles Dodgson experienced sexual attraction to children.
- Useful Oxford Fantasy podcasts: 'The Stories of Lewis Carroll, J. R. R. Tolkien and Philip Pullman' and 'Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll', available at **https://writersinspire.org/themes/fantasy-literature**.
- Christ Church College blog posts with images relating to Alice Liddell and Charles Dodgson at the college: **https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/blog/alice** and **https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/blog/lewis-carroll**