

**“Curiouser and Curiouser”:
Discouraging Female Agency and Curiosity
in ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’**

Julia Schorn

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her paper about female curiosity and agency in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland excerpted below, Julia Schorn adopts an **against-the-grain approach** to mainstream feminist readings of the beloved children’s story, arguing instead that female agency and curiosity is actually discouraged in Wonderland. By both **orienting** us to these mainstream readings and **close reading** the text to differentiate herself from them, Schorn’s particularly strong **motive** calls the entire establishment of Alice scholarship into question.*

Excerpt

In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, one of the most iconic children’s books of all time, young Alice discovers a lively, illogical world that both frightens and intrigues her. This captivating concept has been expressed and replicated in multiple *Alice* films, books, apps, games, and other products. There’s something lasting about *Alice* that at its core, appeals to people from different races, genders, and generations. Perhaps Alice captures the childlike imagination and curiosity we value and try to recapture in ourselves. Alice is admirable for many reasons, and some even argue she is a feminist character who creates her own story, sticks up for herself, and navigates Wonderland with a sense of agency and independence. In fact, Judith Little wrote that both *Alice* books are “almost a comic compendium of feminist issues” (Little 195). However, upon further inspection, Alice doesn’t actually have much control over her experiences in Wonderland and her curiosity is often discouraged, even though it is perhaps her most famous trait. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll portrays female characters with different positions of power, but no female character has any true agency. Only the male characters possess agency, and they use it to keep the institutional power structures of Wonderland intact, creating a static world that is unchanged by any female action.

Throughout the novel, Alice does seem to gain a small sense of agency but it is negligible, for she has little control over what happens to her. As soon as Alice tumbles down the rabbit hole, she is thrust into a nonsensical world that seems to defy everything she knows from her comfortable English lifestyle. It seems as if it is not a daydream of hers but rather an alien world that she has discovered. Alice stands up for herself and attempts to hold her own while meeting the ridiculous creatures of Wonderland. However, she feels so powerless sometimes that she becomes deeply frustrated. After drinking a bottle conspicuously labeled “DRINK ME,” she grows grotesquely huge, despite her pleading to stop (Carroll 29). She bursts through the house and feels uncomfortable and awkward. She is a girl taking up too much space, both literally and figuratively. Alice laments that it was much better at home when “one wasn’t always growing larger or smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits” (Carroll 30). Alice is constantly growing and shrinking, a power she seems to mostly control as the novel progresses. However, even after she knows how to control her size, she resents her constant changing and wishes to be her normal size again (Carroll 41). Additionally, Alice never stops being ordered about by many

different Wonderland creatures, which is also a source of annoyance for her and speaks to her incapability to be an independent agent in Wonderland.

In fact, Alice is constantly undermined, talked over, and ignored. One of the most frustrating times for Alice was meeting the Caterpillar: an iconic, enigmatic character. When Alice finds the Caterpillar, she is having an identity crisis—she no longer knows who she really is, and her self-reflection seems hindered by her constantly changing size, something that theoretically is in her control but actually is a big source of her exasperation. The Caterpillar asks her, “Who are *you?*”, which deeply frustrates Alice (Carroll 37). When talking with the Caterpillar, she reflects that she “had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that she was losing her temper” (Carroll 41). Alice feels powerless as the Caterpillar talks down to her and contradicts everything she says. He gives her advice on how to change size but besides that is utterly unhelpful and rude. After this advice, he “was out of sight,” displaying a disappearing agency that helps affirm his powerfully mysterious role in Wonderland (Carroll 42). Indeed, Alice spends most of her time in Wonderland being irritated, something that seems to contradict the idea that this is her imagination and that she has full agency. Instead, she is questioned and cut off in what is theoretically a world of her creation.

Author Commentary

Julia Schorn

This essay was written in the popular class “Children’s Literature” with Professor Gleason. Under his guidance, I crystallized my nebulous thoughts into a thesis that specifically targeted gender and power structures in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As a lifelong Disney fan, I have always been interested in looking at Disney with a critical lens. When reading *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, I was fascinated by the book’s wordplay and its intriguing characters.

Something felt off, but I wasn’t quite sure. Professor Gleason’s lectures stressed the agency Alice possessed in Wonderland and how this novel legitimized curiosity in children, especially young girls. I liked this idea, and started to reread the novel to explore it a little more. While rereading, I noticed that instead of Alice investigating a magical world of her creation, she was questioned or rudely interrupted many times. It felt like she didn’t belong, even though Wonderland is assumed to be from her imagination. I started to wonder if her curiosity was all that beloved or if it was actually a nuisance.

This started to remind me of how women are often taught to listen, stay silent, not ask questions. I wanted to explore if this idea of denying curiosity was gendered in the novel. To start, I made a chart of every female and male character in the novel and how they were portrayed. I noticed a trend that challenged Professor Gleason’s idea and wanted to run with it, even though it felt a little risky. I began to organize my ideas into different paragraphs of evidence and my motive strengthened as I saw that this wasn’t a tenuous connection but one that strengthened the more evidence I found.

I found myself a little lost as I attempted to challenge one of the most recognized and adored children’s book of all time. Professor Gleason really helped me organize my thoughts and turn my weak observations into a strong thesis. The revision process was lengthy as I restructured my essay many times. I began with a thesis that shied away from saying something controversial, and with every rewrite I became more confident in my writing and embraced the unconventionality.

Fellow Commentary

Nicolette D'Angelo

As Julia suggests in her author's commentary, it isn't hard to fall down the rabbit hole yourself while writing on a text like *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Besides being a universally beloved children's story, *Alice* as of late has also received a lot of love in university settings as well—many, including Princeton professors, have called it a feminist work epitomizing female curiosity, agency, and heroism. (Just last year, Princeton University's Cotsen Children's Library celebrated the story's 150th anniversary, as well as the female curiosity, agency, and creativity it has inspired in that time through its Summer 2016 exhibition, "Alice, after Alice: Adaptation, Illustration, and the 'Alice Industry.'")

Julia's compelling paper, however, dares to argue that the Wonderland of Alice's agency perhaps is not all it's cracked up to be: that "upon further inspection, Alice doesn't actually have much control over her experiences in Wonderland and her curiosity is often discouraged, even though it is perhaps her most famous trait." Julia then shows through detailed close-reading how, instead of being allowed true agency, "Alice is constantly undermined, talked over, and ignored," made powerless and silent by characters such as the Caterpillar, "questioned and cut off in what is theoretically a world of her creation."

In addition to being an original, well-supported argument about the text that utilizes specific analysis in the service of a larger idea, Julia's argument is also to be admired for the many risks it takes in orienting the reader to how *Alice* is traditionally read and celebrated—especially in a feminist context—only to then effectively disarm these traditional and feminist readings. In a classic Gaipa move, Julia "takes on the establishment," disagreeing with the critical consensus in order to find her own place and voice inside ongoing (and frankly intimidating) scholarly discussions within children's literature.

The result of Julia's bold motive is an equally against-the-grain thesis claim: that Carroll's Wonderland is "a static world that is unchanged by any female action." Her claim suggests that perhaps we've all accidentally imagined Wonderland to be more wonderful than it actually was (or as wonderful as we wished it was), challenging even the most skeptical of readers to reconsider not only Carroll's text but the "static world" of criticism surrounding it as well.

Professor Commentary

Bill Gleason, Department of English

What I find so engaging about the opening to Julia Schorn's paper on female agency in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is first the verve with which it reminds readers of what so many of us love about Alice—her irrepressible curiosity—and then the precision with which it punctures the critical consensus about the implications of that curiosity: namely, that Alice has far less ability to shape her own adventures than her much-praised independence would lead us to believe. By the end of the opening paragraph, Schorn turns the tables completely on this consensus. Not only does Alice have less agency than readers typically assume, “no female character,” Schorn argues, “has any true agency.” Despite its enchanting vibrancy, Wonderland is a “static world that is unchanged by any female action.” Quite a discouraging pronouncement! But an argumentatively powerful one.

The next two paragraphs begin to show the variety of ways in which Alice's curiosity is squelched, shunned, ignored, or minimized. As she shows here, Schorn is particularly skilled at introducing multiple brief yet illuminating examples in a short space. In the rest of the paper she dives yet deeper, showing how even the most powerful female character in the novel—the infamous Queen of Hearts—has no real power to make anything happen in her own kingdom. The thwarting of Alice's agency is thus a symptom of a larger problem in Wonderland: it is trapped in a male-controlled stasis that no amount of Alice's adventuring will disrupt.

From its counterintuitive opening claim to the way its sentences pull you forward (I particularly like this paragraph transition: “In fact, Alice is constantly undermined, talked over, and ignored”), this paper—unlike its subject!—has considerable agency.

Works Cited

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Bios

Julia Schorn '17 is a psychology major, pursuing certificates in neuroscience, musical performance, and Italian language & culture. Outside of class, she plays harp in the Princeton University Orchestra and is the President of "Music in Mind." She wrote this as a junior.

Nicolette D'Angelo '19 is happy to join the *Tortoise* staff this year, supplementing her other editorial experiences on-campus as Managing Editor of *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Fellow in the Writing Center, staff writer for *Stripe Magazine* and Head Symposiarch for the Council of the Humanities' first year mentorship program. When she isn't reading other students' work, she enjoys writing poetry, singing in the University Chapel Choir, eating (too many) cookies in Murray Dodge Cafe and visiting her family in West Milford, NJ. She will most likely concentrate in English (Theory & Criticism) with certificates in Gender & Sexuality Studies, Humanistic Studies and Creative Writing. She wrote this as a sophomore.