Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

A Feminist Bildungsroman
Abstract

This thesis has two aims. The first one is to elucidate how *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) functions as a Bildungsroman, and the other one is to demonstrate how the novel also has a coming of age aspect based on feminism. Whilst Alice matures in the traditional sense, she also in parallel does so as a stronger female fighting for gender rights with signs of feminism. The feminist angle as well as the surreal world of Wonderland makes the novel a not very obvious Bildungsroman in a genre dominated by male protagonists. For Alice to be a young female child who ends up in a fantasy world thus makes her a very fascinating character. The central hypothesis of this thesis is that what Alice is exposed to and reacts to in Wonderland generally reflects the genre of a Bildungsroman and also specifically a feminist Bildungsroman. Theoretical framework is based on the ideas of Franco Moretti, Mikhail Bakhtin, Thomas Jeffers, Carol Lazzaro-Weis, George Eliot and Elizabeth Drew Stoddard, as well as novels by Eliot and Stoddard. This includes dynamic protagonists, unpredictable development, symbols of modernity, the quest for universality, and minor characters who make sure that the protagonist develops, as well as feminist struggle by means of disregarding the ‘cult of true womanhood’ in a genre and society dominated by men.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

“Who in the world am I?” – The Identity Crisis and Dangers of Emotions ................. 7

Alice’s Claim to Maturity by Being an Astute Player of Games ................................. 10

A Feminist Heroine ........................................................................................................ 17

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 22

Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 24
Introduction

The Bildungsroman was a popular literary genre in the latter half of the 18th century as well as in the 19th century, but which also exists after that. It reflects young characters’ coming of age, with both their physical and psychological maturing throughout the events of the novel along with confidence and integrity. Acknowledged works in the Bildungsroman genre are for instance Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96), Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and Gottfried Keller’s *Green Henry* (1855).

Notably, these works of fiction concern a male Bildungsheld (the subject of a coming of age story). In contrast, this is not the case in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) where the protagonist is a female, as with for example Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Instead, it portrays the coming of age, with aspects of puberty and a reaching of adulthood, of the clever seven-year-old girl Alice in her visit to the odd and remarkable world of Wonderland after falling down a rabbit hole. Despite the biological impossibility for Alice to reach puberty and claim adulthood-like traits at her young age, the novel has her do so to emphasise coming of age. In Wonderland animals are able to talk and behave like humans. Furthermore, the world deviates immensely from her world above ground in the sense that Wonderland does not follow the same logic, but rather that of nonsense and madness. Not only does the novel highlight the coming of age in the traditional way, it also deals in parallel with the concept in the way of feminism. In this sense, Alice progressively develops into a feminist heroine in her coming of age fighting against traditional gender roles in a feminist Bildungsroman.

The aim of this thesis is to elucidate how *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is a Bildungsroman. The thesis will also focus on Alice’s parallel gender struggle as a feminist in her path towards maturity. The central hypothesis of this study is that what Alice is exposed to and reacts to in Wonderland generally reflects the genre of a Bildungsroman and also
specifically a feminist Bildungsroman. What this means is that her exposure to the world of Wonderland and its characters changes Alice in terms of her physical and psychological maturity and her rise in integrity and confidence, including her being an inspirational feminist figure for women and men. Thus, whilst Alice develops in her various interactions in Wonderland to become a strong individual, she would also in addition be specifically strengthened as a female when reacting to gender roles, stereotypes, expectations and the liberation from these.

The thesis will be divided into several sections for the analysis part, all of which focus on Alice’s coming of age. In the first section, there will be an emphasise on the issue of Alice’s identity crisis, where she is unsure of who she really is, relating to her lack of emotional control and maturity. Moreover, she is subject to the literal danger of emotions. In contrast to the first section of analysis is the second section with its treating of Alice’s eventual claim to emotional control and the peak of her maturity – the ultimate proof of Alice’s gradual achievement in her coming of age where she truly becomes an individual with great confidence and integrity as an astute player of the various games she encounters in Wonderland. In Wonderland games are of high importance, and through the participation in games, Alice matures as games mirror problems in the real world. This section also addresses the importance of advice for Alice in the form of the ever-smiling Cheshire Cat who has perfect control over itself. Accompanying it are all other characters who function as subordinates to Alice as a Bildungsheld, making sure she matures through her interaction with them. Followed by this, is the third and final section dealing with the essential topic of feminism in the novel. There the way Alice matures into a strong female is elucidated where she functions as a feminist heroine and inspiration for both women and men.

Thomas L. Jeffers explains in Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana that the protagonist in the Bildungsroman is special due to the fact that he or she
has the feature of not being ready made (2). Being ready made in literature signifies a character of a static nature – a character that does not change in personality as the plot of a novel progresses. In a Bildungsroman, this is not the case. On the contrary, the protagonist is dynamic and develops throughout the events of the literary work. Franco Moretti makes the intriguing point in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* on this development which is highly relevant for the Bildungsroman: the protagonist’s progress is unpredictable (4). Instead of following in his or her father’s or mother’s footsteps, the protagonist’s progress takes on an “uncertain exploration of social space . . . through travel and adventure, wandering and getting lost . . .” (4). This means that the Bildungsheld is exposed to a development that occurs as a result of doing something out of the ordinary – something new. Moretti links this characteristic to the turn of the 18th century with modernity in mind, utilising the young protagonist of the Bildungsroman as a symbol for modernity (5).

Jeffers acknowledges Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s theories on the Bildungsroman. Rousseau perceived the Bildungsroman as a genre linked to the “individual’s many-sided potential” (Jeffers 3). On a similar note, Goethe emphasised “the importance of an all-round, harmonious self-mastery” as an ultimate goal for the protagonist (3). Jeffers further calls attention to Goethe’s idea that the “desired universality would only be attained through the aggregate of different specialities – baker’s work supplementing butcher’s, builder’s supplementing architect’s, and so on” (3). As the Bildungsheld goes on his or her adventure and gets lost, the beginning of a journey to reach universality commences by the integration of prior knowledge with what the Bildungsheld experiences throughout the story. What makes the Bildungsroman particularly intriguing is the fact that it deals with the development of the minds of young people. This is a group in society that possesses the least level of experience in life and are the ones most in need of guidance to mature in their path towards adulthood. Jean Jacques Rousseau emphasised this in his novel *Émile or on*
Education (1762) where readers in Europe learnt that “children were not miniature adults but creatures with their own peculiar needs and capacities, which parents and teachers had to honour”, which addresses how sensitive young people are (Jeffers 2). Mikhail Bakhtin asserts in “The Bildungsroman and its Significance in the History of Realism” that the Bildungsroman presents “a different side of the world to man, a side that had previously been foreign to the novel. It lead to a radical reinterpretation of the elements of the novel’s plot and opened up for the novel new and realistically productive points for viewing the world” (23).

In other words, the Bildungsroman allows for the perceiving of the novel as a genre where the way the world itself appears and is interpreted early on in the narrative progressively changes for the protagonist and the readers as the story develops. For the main character, the world is initially confusing due to immaturity and lack of life experience. However, further along the story, this takes a turn for the better, as the character developments. The interpretation of the world also changes through the protagonist’s growing comprehension of the way the world works.

Jeffers highlights minor characters’ influence on the main character in a Bildungsroman. These could be “family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers” (35). He claims that “other people are plainly subordinate: their job is to water, fertilize, and prune the growing ‘plant’, the Bildungsheld, whose nursery is the world” (35). As the Bildungsheld then goes on his or her adventure and gets lost, he or she also encounters various minor characters in the same world whose function in the Bildungsroman is to facilitate the protagonist’s development – aiding the coming of age. These characters can do this actively or passively. If actively, the characters function as advisers who literally give the main character pieces of advice so he or she can mature. In the passive approach, the minor characters influence the Bildungsheld by their verbal and non-verbal actions. He or she will then react to this and decide if what the minor characters do and say is positive or negative, resulting in the
subconscious process of maturity.

Jeffers argues that if the hero of the literary work is not a normal child, the author can do more with him or her (17). An orphan protagonist is usually more interesting than an average child with two parents and two siblings. With the former, the lack of a family and perhaps friends, as well as issues with social ranks and attitudes towards society are favourable topics. In Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Alice is not a normal child of the Victorian Era. She dares to be curious and fight gender roles. Carol Lazzaro-Weis asserts in “The Female ‘Bildungsroman’: Calling It into Question” that the Bildungsroman “and all of its variants have managed to gain some theoretical currency among female critics” (Lazzaro-Weis 17). Why is this the case then? Lazzaro-Weis addresses the fact that women writers have been in a position where men dominated the literary profession and have been seen as inferior in this position. On this she states that women are negatively influenced by the male judgements, expectations, criteria, and prejudices generic categories harbor. One cannot deny that since most generic conventions are based on or lead to generalizations about a “universal” sensibility, traditional generic categories have always ignored gender issues . . . [A]ttempts to historicize and temporalize generic categories . . . have made no serious effort to incorporate women’s writing, except perhaps under the rubric of flawed imitations, or worse yet, secondary genres. (16)

Moreover, she claims that the Bildungsroman “proved most useful in analysing the ways in which the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by particular patriarchal norms” (17). By boldly breaking loose from the traditional patriarchal way of perceiving the female gender, highlighting that women are and should not be in an inferior and negatively categorised position resulting from sexism, feminism gained some attention through the
Bildungsroman. Sybil Weir focuses on Elizabeth Drew Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* (1862) in “The Morgesons: A Neglected Feminist Bildungsroman”. In her novel Stoddard practises a disregard of the “cult of true womanhood” – the stereotype that women should be passive and submissive by “stay[ing] safely on shore” while men go on voyages of self-discovery (430, 427). Furthermore, the stereotype also means that female characters should approve of society’s definition of their gender by being maintainers of the status quo, preservers of class distinctions and functioning as guardians of the accepted morality in society, striving to keep order and decorum (427). In contrast, Stoddard fights for the opposite in *The Morgesons* where the female heroine Cassandra takes on her self-discovery and “firmly rejects the established social institutions”, and is “eager to learn about herself and the world” (427, 430).

Mary Gosselink de Jong highlights in “Romola: A Bildungsroman for Feminists?” the woman’s “daring to know the self” (Gosselink de Jong 79). She refers to George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862-63), with an emphasis towards “women’s arrival at self-definition” which is linked to Stoddard’s ideas (81). This ‘daring’ is the courage to defy traditional gender roles by taking an active exploration role. This role will be addressed specifically later in this thesis.

As regards Alice, next to fulfilling the symbolism for modernity by going her own way, she also completes this role on a feminist level in her coming of age by rising in maturity with strong female integrity where she is not afraid to define herself as a person rather than a woman. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that because of the fact that Alice is only seven years old, she does not have to act in a feminine way to attract boys as she in real life would not have reached puberty. She could then simply ignore gender roles and act as a young child. However, as claimed earlier, Lewis Carroll ignores the biological impossibility for her to reach puberty and applies adult-like features, and Alice does act in a feminist way in much of the novel, which will be explored later in this thesis. The above implies that she does not mature in the obvious way along with the fact that Wonderland is
not a normal environment for coming of age, making the study very interesting. In this sense, the interpretation that is possible after Bakhtin’s claim about the emergence of a different world through the realist Bildungsroman, is not altogether the case in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. It is true to some degree in the novel. At first the world and Alice’s experiences in Wonderland are frightening to her; characters are utterly mad and occasionally rude, animals are able to talk and behave like humans, the world itself has odd proportions, and she changes in size, etc. Foremost, Wonderland lacks the logic that Alice is used to that focuses on sense and sanity – something she seeks. The longer Alice spends in Wonderland, the more she gets used to it, and the less she endeavours to find sense as she realises there is none. However, evidently, the novel is not subject to realism with the aforementioned where Alice not only sees her life in a new light – she is in a different world altogether – a world of madness, impossibilities and nonsense. In contrast, Alice’s coming of age is facilitated through Wonderland’s surrealism – a breakaway from reality.¹ It is what does not make sense that causes her to mature rather than what does make sense.

“Who in the world am I?” – The Identity Crisis and Dangers of Emotions

Prior to Alice’s falling down the rabbit hole and trip to Wonderland, she has gone through a developmental stage. Donald Rackin claims in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass: Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning that in this stage “the world and its words appear completely explainable, where all questions have answers, where mysteries and paradoxes are simply puzzles awaiting inevitable solutions” (Rackin 38). As a bright child, Alice has realised in her world above ground that this is the case. However, Wonderland is far from what Alice is used to. This leads to the inevitability where her view of

¹ Surrealism in this sense is not linked to the surrealist movement.
the world will confuse her in Wonderland. Rackin makes the prominent claim that Carroll thus has made his audience ready for Alice’s first significant conflict with mayhem – Alice will view the impossible world of Wonderland with the mindset that it is possible (38). This makes her very vulnerable as confusion is imminent and just waits to overwhelm her. In the words of Rackin “Alice naturally tries to relate herself to the secure stability of her past experience”, as her “faith in the simple orderliness of the universe” accompanies Alice (39-40, 37). However, it soon manifests itself that her imagined security is far from a protector. The chaos that is the direct result of her belief in possibility, in turn leads to a significant property of the Bildungsroman which is the identity crisis. This is also the case with Alice where her experiences in Wonderland causes her to challenge and doubt her own identity.

The central question in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland deals directly with the identity crisis; Alice asks herself, “Who in the world am I?” (Carroll 15). Then she continues by stating, “Ah, that’s a great puzzle! . . . I’m sure I’m not Ada . . . and I ca’n’t be Mabel . . . Besides, she’s she, and I’m I” (15). Alice clearly is unsure of her identity. However, it is important to state that the fact that she reaches the conclusion that she cannot be anyone else than herself, suggests rudimentary maturity. Michael A. D’Ambrosio makes the following point in “‘Alice’ for Adolescents” about this section in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: “It is indeed, an amazing phenomenon for a child to realize for the first time that she is a unique individual with a personality and behavior apart from others.” (D’Ambrosio 1074). This early sign of maturity is a vital achievement in Alice’s gradual process in gaining confidence for her as an individual with strong integrity. For Alice to become this individual, she must be certain of who she is. Despite this level of maturity and image of relief, identity is not that simple. In fact, Alice is further challenged and has another identity crisis when she reaches the White Rabbit’s house. There the White Rabbit is fully convinced that Alice is his housemaid Mary Anne and tells her to fetch his gloves and fan inside the house. In the words of Rackin,
“Alice – attempting as usual to relate her adventures to some orderly pattern in above-ground experience – accepts the new role and imagines how the new identity will follow her back up to her own homeland where her cat Dinah will also treat her like a servant” (Rackin 41).

Albeit, exaggerated nonsense as it may be that Alice would have her pet cat as her ruler in her life above ground, there is a point to this. Domestic cats do not have to do anything for humans to get fed and have shelter. This implies a sort of master and servant relationship where cats can rest all day and still get what they want, while their owners serve them. Rackin makes the following point about this fact, highly relevant to Alice’s coming of age with regards to identity and her encounters with the various inhabitants living in Wonderland, where Carroll has put a spin on the whole idea of status and rank in society:

This Wonderland reversal of ordinary domination patterns (which also undermines the ideology of ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ hierarchies frequently invoked in ruling-class discourse as a validation for arbitrary privilege and social class ranking) will continue throughout *Wonderland*, as many of the ‘lower’ class creatures order Alice about. Like Alice’s continuing changes in size, this reversal represents variation of Wonderland’s pervasive interrogation of stable identity, since changes in power relationships, like changes in size, symbolize profound changes in identity. (41-42)

What Rackin states about size change is another central aspect of the identity crisis and lack of emotional maturity. Early on in the novel, Alice shrinks and grows massively in size after drinking the content of a bottle labelled ‘DRINK ME’ and eating a cake marked ‘EAT ME’. With the drink her body becomes a tiny ten inches high and with the cake she is so tall that she barely can see her own feet with a height of nine feet. Alice tries to remember a poem, some geography and her multiplication tables, but she fails to get them right and reaches the conclusion that she really must be her friend Mabel after all, whom Alice thinks knows very little (Carroll 16). Being sure she really is herself is not so certain for Alice anymore. This
results in Alice bursting into tears due to confusing and frankly frightening changes in size, symbolising a lack of emotional maturity as Alice is not confident with physical growth. The crying eventually results in a vast ocean of tears due to Alice’s physical size, which she later travels on when she shrinks in size again after drinking more from the bottle. Carole Rother argues in “Lewis Carroll’s Lesson: Coping with Fears of Personal Destruction” that it is imperative that the fears and anxieties Alice continually experiences, expressed in both physical misadventures and in words, must be under strict control. This child reader must learn that emotion is dangerous. Alice gives way to tears and almost drowns, literally, in her emotions when she falls into the giant pool formed from her own weeping. (92)

Evidently, when Alice is able to change in size at will aided by the bottle and cake, it is initially a delightful experience as children often associate power with size (Rackin 39). Though shortly after, the sudden change from ten inches to nine feet is confusing and frightening for poor Alice, and change in size is “to a child of seven often a matter of physical and emotional survival” (38). This is evident throughout this thesis with how Alice is exposed to various changes in size – both increases and decreases.

**Alice’s Claim to Maturity by Being an Astute Player of Games**

In contrast to Alice’s lack of emotional control linked to identity and integrity, further into the story, Alice demonstrates the opposite. In contrast to when she is in grave danger in the pool of tears early in the novel, Alice is quite capable of controlling the situation at the Mad Hatter’s tea-party. There Alice is exposed to a great deal of madness and nonsense. One salient example is when she first enters and the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse cry out, “No room! No room!” when clearly the table is very large and they only use one end of it
(Carroll 54). Here Alice stands up for herself and says, “There’s plenty of room!” Furthermore, the March Hare offers Alice some wine and later says there is none. Alice angrily replies to this by saying, “Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it” (54). Eventually, after not being able to cope with the characters anymore, Alice leaves the tea-party saying to herself, “It’s the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!” (61). This is also linked to right at the end of the party when the Mad Hatter interrupts her when she says, “I don’t think” stating, “Then you shouldn’t talk” (60). Instead of being a polite seven-year-old girl following etiquette and doing what she is told, she claims autonomy. She also does this by asking questions, stating what she thinks is right and objecting the tea members’ illogic. In the scene after the croquet game where the Duchess and Alice converse, the Duchess practises her fondness of explaining the moral to everything she says. This peculiar behaviour causes Alice to think a lot, which the Duchess questions by asking, “Thinking again?” (72). Alice feels worried over this as the Duchess challenges her autonomy, and sharply replies, “I’ve a right to think”, “asserting her own rights . . .” (Carroll 72, Rother 93). In Alice’s encounter with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle she also interrupts and shows integrity. When the Gryphon states that they went to school at sea, he adds that Alice may not believe it. Alice then interrupts, saying that she never said she did not (Carroll 76).

In the final scene in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Alice takes part in a trial ordered by the Queen of Hearts who wants to know who has stolen her tarts. The scene satirises the legal system where “things of little or no importance are recorded by the jury as important, whereas, the important evidence is neglected” (D’Ambrosio 1075). When a letter of evidence is brought forth, the King and Queen interpret it as they like and then reject the evidence as they deem it irrelevant to the case of the tarts, even though it is direct evidence. Throughout the scene, Alice gradually grows larger and larger in physical size, to which the King, feeling threatened, later remarks, “Rule Forty-two. All persons more than a mile high to
leave the court” (Carroll 93). Alice knows this is nonsense and challenges the King stating that he just made it up, to which he says, “It’s the oldest rule in the book”. Alice then shows more astuteness and confidence which makes the King dumbfounded and quiet: “Then it ought to be Number One” (94). As Alice grows larger, so does her integrity, where she is not the least afraid to interrupt the King. In contrast to her fear of size change, she is no longer afraid; she is confident with it and demonstrates her peak in maturity. The new size gives her the power she needs to oppose royalty. This reflects a child’s acceptance of his or her body’s physical changes as they age leading to confidence; in puberty children are uncomfortable by how they change, but further as they age, they become comfortable with it. Moreover, in terms of confidence, James R. Kincaid states in “Alice’s Invasion of Wonderland” that Alice feels “much at home at the grotesque trial ‘quite pleased to find that she knew the name of nearly everything [in the courtroom]’” (Kincaid 94). Evidently, her rise in integrity causes her not to fear a courtroom. Finally, when Alice thinks the King and Queen have gone too far in the illogical trial, where the Queen suggests that the sentence should be carried out before the verdict, Alice loudly cries out, “Stuff and nonsense!” (Carroll 97). When Alice refuses to hold her tongue, demanding her rights, the Queen shouts the common phrase “Off with her head” as the mad ruler she is (97). This is the peak of Alice’s integrity, emotional control and psychological maturity with her full size, where she acts the role of an adult with the power to oppose the Queen and say: “Who cares for you? . . . You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (97). In the words of D’Ambrosio, “Alice, mature at last, doesn’t wonder if she is acting within the boundaries of correct etiquette and regulations” (1075). D’Ambrosio further claims that “she knows she is right and asserts her identity by condemning this nonsensical behavior in the adults” (1075). For a child to be able to claim such authority to contradict and oppose adults, let alone royalty who, in this case, symbolise supreme power, is a huge leap in Alice’s coming of age. Ultimately, this giant leap is an aspect of the Bildungsroman where the
protagonist shows his or her peak of control through maturity; it is the point in the novel where the Bildungsheld is the most in contrast personality-wise to when he or she first appeared at the beginning of the novel. Early on, the protagonist is often unsure of the world and himself or herself, and is clearly in need of development. However, at the end of the novel, the world is clear and he or she is fully aware of, or mostly aware of, who he or she is. Rother claims the following on Alice’s own peak of maturity: “As Alice puts the trial scene into perspective and perceptually breaks through the restraints and illogicality of the distorted judiciary farce which is binding her, she gains mastery and wakes from her dream” (94). This means that when Alice finally opposes the highest of powers in Wonderland who represent the summit of nonsense and madness, she is in absolute control, overpowering Wonderland. Furthermore, as she has done so, there is little else for Alice to learn in Wonderland at the time being, and she can then leave Wonderland by waking up in the real world above ground.

Regarding Goethe’s and Rousseau’s theories on the “individual’s many-sided potential” and “the importance of an all-round, harmonious self-mastery”, they certainly apply to Alice (Jeffers 3). That Alice is a child subject to good and polite manners is by no means a hyperbole. Alice is at the start of the novel really careful with what she does and says. An example illustrating her early non-verbal actions is when she has just fallen down the rabbit hole after her chasing the White Rabbit. Whilst she slowly descends, she picks up a jar from a shelf and afterwards puts it back to refrain from killing someone underneath, would she drop it (Carroll 8). On her early verbal carefulness, a salient example is the scene in the novel when Alice encounters the rude Caterpillar. There she tries to be as polite as possible to get on good terms with him, though all in vain where he remains rude, perhaps even more so (35-36). With Alice’s journey to Wonderland, she is able to gain her universality. Wonderland complements her polite and good manners, and etiquette with all its peculiar characters, social norms and reverse etiquette, as well as the mad world itself. Apart from being a well-raised
and educated child, she also turns into a strong individual with great confidence, best shown in the final scene of the novel with the opposing of the King and Queen of Hearts. Wonderland thus functions for Alice as a gateway to universality.

Alice’s dream has functioned as a game where the prize is maturity. Through the game, Alice turns into an astute player of games to reach maturity, opposed to her initial reactions where she is in danger due to inexperience. Rother makes this claim about games: “Games help us to play with situations that could threaten or destroy us in real life, and provide opportunities for a vicarious acting out of emotions, aggressions, fears and conflicts” (90). In this respect, the way Alice plays various games, going on adventures in Wonderland affects her real life. Carroll uses playing cards as dominant instruments in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, with the King and Queen as the top positions, who also rule Wonderland. In the same sense as power in the card games, the cards reflect social power and the social order in Wonderland (Rother 90). The way Alice acts powerfully, opposing the King and Queen of Hearts, brings out aggression and emotions showing a lack of fear of people with power. When Alice wakes up from her time in Wonderland she will do so with more confidence as a strong individual due to her game playing. There are other games Alice encounters on her adventures in Wonderland, such as the riddle “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” asked by the Mad Hatter at the tea-party (Carroll 55). The question does not have an answer, and the apparent nonsense confuses Alice in her search for sense and logic. Another pronounced game is the Caucus Race where participants run in a circle when they feel like it and likewise when they leave the circle, followed by a random stop where winners are chosen even though there are no obvious winners in the first place. Moreover, when Alice interacts with the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle she further shows that she is ahead of the other players in the games. One example is their playing on the word *lesson* as if it was linked with the word *lessen*. For each day, the hours spent on lessons when they went to school lessened – “ten
hours the first day . . . nine the next” (77). Alice then figures out that the eleventh day must have been a free day as it would have no hours. When she then asks what happened on the twelfth day, the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are forced to move on as Alice has outsmarted the system.

In the novel, Alice realises that there is no meaning to it all, which is a question she asks herself. Rackin sheds some light on this issue:

[The] creatures Alice meet will always go round their mad tea tables and pointless caucus rings, with no possible rationale or goal, no stop to their endless circles – graphic metaphors for the Darwinian model of nature’s instinctual, endless round of adaption and self-preservation and of the permanent schism between the working nature and the human spirit’s need for closure, completeness, and final meaning. (92)

For Alice, realising that there is no logic to the games she takes part in, causes her to advance in confidence by being a great many steps ahead of the other players in the games. This is by being capable of seeing what is nonsense and madness, which the other players cannot, and ultimately believing more in her own logic. To the others, nonsense and madness are what is normal and logical and they do not know what sense and sanity are as they are residents of Wonderland. This is not the case for Alice who is able to challenge the games which she for instance does with the Raven and the Writing Desk riddle, and even more so at the court scene where she cries out that the King and Queen of Hearts and their guards are ‘nothing but a pack of cards!’. This is thus equal to Alice standing up for herself and being a better player than the ones she plays the games with, signifying maturity.

However, Alice is not completely on her own throughout her journey. Aiding Alice on her path to maturity and emotional control is the Cheshire Cat. It functions as a sort of adviser as well as a role model to Alice in the confusing world of Wonderland. It “has perfect control over itself, for it follows no one’s rules but its own” (Rother 93). This is
something Alice ultimately gains throughout the novel through maturity in the form of confidence, as with her peak in confidence in the final scene where Alice is courageous enough to contradict and defy the King and Queen of Hearts. The Cheshire Cat is also capable of “appear[ing] when and where it pleases, and by stages” (93). This along with its very long claws and big smile with a great many teeth “suggests a balance of control of emotion in contrast to so many other excessively violent and timid creatures that Alice meets” (93).

Furthermore, Alice thinks the Cat looks good-natured and should be treated with respect due to its looks, implying that she even at first glance feels the Cat could be useful to her. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Jeffers emphasises other characters’ influence on the main character in a Bildungsroman. He claims that these could be “family, friends, acquaintances, and strangers” and that “other people are plainly subordinate: their job is to water, fertilize, and prune the growing ‘plant’, the Bildungsheld, whose nursery is the world” (35). In Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, the Cheshire Cat takes on the role of a subordinate very successfully, making sure Alice the Bildungsheld grows. Another striking character is the Caterpillar who functions as one of the most prominent contrasts to the Cheshire Cat as a subordinate, along with the King and Queen of Hearts – it has features that Alice does not strive for or need in her coming of age. Its growing rudeness, however, affects Alice in the sense that it “contributes to the continuing antipathy between Alice and the creatures of Wonderland. Generally, she is met . . . with condescension or mistrust; and most of the underground creatures she encounters are quick to contradict her, undermining at every opportunity the premises of trust . . .” (Rackin 47). Thus, when Alice distances herself from these characters, she matures by striving to become what they are not. Importantly, characters along with Wonderland itself then nurse Alice in her coming of age actively and passively, no matter if they do so in a manner that Alice acknowledges. As the story progresses, this
nursing gives rise to growth; Alice starts off as a ‘seed’, as it were, and eventually turns into a developed ‘flower’.

**A Feminist Heroine**

Jeffers comments on the presence of young males in the 19th century society whom the society needs to worry about (4). This is a hefty number of people, “often fatherless, guilt-heaped, and feeling undervalued – tests lower, goes to college less often, and gets into legal trouble more than . . . females do” (4). However, he does claim that there are “prepotent femininities” in *David Copperfield, Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* and *Sons and Lovers* (4). Although this is true, these works of fiction lack a female protagonist. This is not the case with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. In the novel, Alice symbolises another segment in society that is in need of aid. She is what would be considered a person of low social status in Victorian England – she is a woman and a young child. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* could be viewed as a feminist fictional work struggling to highlight women’s position in a patriarchal world. Judith Little suggests in “Liberated Alice: Dodgson’s Female Hero as Domestic Rebel” that Alice “literally [is an] ‘underground’ image of a woman resisting the ‘system’” – the system of traditional gender roles where the woman is oppressed in a society ruled by men (Little 204). In addition, what better person could take on this image than a young female child, considering its social inferiority in Victorian England?

Megan S. Lloyd acknowledges Alice’s spirit in “Unruly Alice: A Feminist View of Some Adventures in Wonderland”, where she is not “trapped by the confines of roles or requirements”, but rather “rejects and frees herself from stereotypical female traits” (Lloyd 9). Lloyd writes the following on Alice’s strength as a female:
Society all too often ridicules strong women, interpreting assertive actions as aggressive and transgressive. The powerful, autonomous woman to some may be the impetuous, reckless, and unruly woman to others. Indeed, Alice eats and drinks what she sees, intrudes, barges in, takes her seat at the tea party uninvited, hears a squeaking pencil from one juror and takes it from him, uses her intellect to solve problems, and frequently speaks her mind – everything young women should do. (9)

In “How Wanderer Alice Became Warrior Alice and Why” Kristina Aikens comments on Hilary Schor’s claim that women in the 19th century were prohibited to indulge themselves in curiosity (Aikens 29). This idea has its origin in the terrifying fear that they can acquire knowledge and thus threaten the patriarchal society (29). Curious women in stories were severely punished for their curious nature, such as Pandora, Eve, Lot’s wife and Bluebeard’s wife, who were “seeking knowledge by opening forbidden boxes or sticking keys into locked chests or eating dangerous food” (29). In contrast, in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland as well as its sequel Through the Looking-Glass (1871), Alice does similar “forbidden” things, expressed by Lloyd above, and is in many ways just such a curious female. Importantly, despite the fact that Alice “end[s] up in some awkward and uncomfortable situations, she is never truly punished for her curiosity. In fact, her fearless spirit of adventure, her willingness to go anywhere and try anything, no matter how strange or absurd of even potentially dangerous, is the character’s most appealing and beloved attribute” (Aikens 29). Carroll thus cleverly removes the label of prohibition from women’s curiosity and instead invests it with connotations of triumph and praise.

Alice’s sister fulfils the traditional passive female role very well, as a contrast to Alice, having little to do but read books – books without pictures to while away the time (Lloyd 9-10). Alice does not want to do the same, and further decides it is not worth the trouble to pick daisies to make a daisy chain (Carroll 7). Instead, she “chooses an active
function” and follows the White Rabbit into the rabbit hole (Lloyd 10). This action is by no means passive, and even on the first page of the book, Alice shows her feminist spirit to oppose the traditional female gender role. Curiosity however, is altogether not simple according to Aikens. She suggests that it “involves a complex, paradoxical combination of activity and passivity. The curious person at once actively seeks knowledge, but also passively follows the object of interest rather than somehow overpowering it or mastering it.” (29). Aikens uses the initial act of curiosity where Alice actively follows the White Rabbit as an example which results in her passively falling down the rabbit hole. Aikens goes as far as stating that Alice thus lacks control and that “her passivity works in conjunction with activity in order to allow exploration” with her active arguing and her passive observing (29).

However, it manifests itself in the novel that this is not fully the case. At first, Alice definitely takes on a passive role, falling down the hole, being polite to people, does what other people say, etc. However, as the story progresses, her active spirit overshadows her passivity with the rise in Alice’s self-confidence and integrity where she argues, interrupts and does not care about proper etiquette with a control that is absolute and superior to the King and Queen of Hearts. This active spirit and capacity for independent choices is best shown with the interaction with the royal couple, the Mad Hatter and guests at the mad tea-party, the Duchess, and the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle.

Alice’s sister, on the other hand, “attempts to escape through reading and daydreaming” and she “falls into a female trap, accepting what’s in front of her and not fully understanding the agency and opportunity within herself” (Lloyd 17). By doing so, falling back to an idle approach, she will not, unlike Alice, reach Wonderland. The breakaway from passivity is also present when Alice knocks on the Duchess’s door and no one opens. Alice asks herself, “But what am I to do?”, to which the Footman replies, “Anything you like” (Carroll 46). Lloyd makes the astute statement that “‘Anything you like’ opens up all
possibilities for her” and “she learns that the norms of society that she may follow really mean very little . . . [-] she has the power to do anything within herself” (10-11). Ultimately, if Alice can do anything she likes, so can other young women (11). Importantly, they can do this even if they are regarded by social norms not to have this right. Similarly, when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat which way she should go, it tells her that it “depends a good deal on where you want to get to” (Carroll 51). There the Cheshire Cat basically challenges and encourages Alice to take her own decisions, which she increasingly does. Apart from being autonomous throughout the novel to mature in the traditional way of the Bildungsroman, this section also implies that even a little girl can decide for herself, favouring feminism.

In the scene where the Pigeon believes that Alice is a serpent wanting to eat its eggs after Alice has grown tremendously in height after eating a bit of mushroom, Alice does not conform to traditional reactions to motherhood (Lloyd 12). According to these, Alice would sympathise with the Pigeon for caring for its eggs. This is not the case, where Alice distances herself from motherhood by stating that, “little girls eat eggs as much as serpents do” (Carroll 43). Further on in the story, Alice is given the responsibility of the Duchess’s child after the Duchess throws it to her (49). Strikingly, Alice does not feel any affection for the baby – she lacks the so-called “cute baby syndrome” where whether the baby is ugly or not is completely irrelevant – it is still a darling (Lloyd 13). Instead, she finds it tough to look at and wishes nothing to do with it. Not surprisingly, she lets go of it when it turns into a pig, thinking it absurd to carry it. Evidently, Alice is the complete opposite to the female connection to motherhood – she could not care less. Lloyd implies that perhaps Carroll viewed motherhood as not being a requirement for women (14). Thus, there is therefore no need for Alice to think that there is. To instead be curious and dissociate herself from the traditional female role, supports Alice’s striving for autonomy as a Bildungsheld with feminist values.
Aikens gives a great suggestion of one of the reasons *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is as special as it is, summing up the novel’s feminist inspirational nature:

[I]t represents alternative ways to be female: We don’t have to obsess over marriage and domesticity, but we also don’t have to kill things or pursue careers that hinge on oppressing others. Rather, we can chase something interesting, barge in where we’re not invited, try new things, observe strange phenomena, ask too many questions, argue with authority figures, tell stories, and wander far from home without worrying how to get back. And this is what has made Alice such an enduring symbol of imagination, creativity, and curiosity for more than a century and counting. (31)

Vitally, this implies that women ought not to be afraid of doing anything, especially not because they are female. Instead of conforming to traditional gender roles as being subordinate to men and needing to do female duties, women should do what they like and feel is right without being worried about doing so, and should by all means speak their minds. Above all, they have the right to be curious and follow their White Rabbits, and never stop doing so. For a Bildungsroman, Lewis Carroll encourages this with his protagonist Alice who is not afraid to do as she likes. Following the theory of modernity, highlighting actions out of the ordinary something unpredictable and new that Moretti emphasises, Alice dares to go her own way. She indeed does something new unlike her sister and other women at the time who were not supposed to be curious but rather calm and subordinate, with the fear that they may gain knowledge and oppose the patriarchal society. If Alice had done the same as her sister, reading books all day out of boredom, she would not have triggered her successful and, as it were, liberating coming of age by chasing the White Rabbit.
Conclusion

To conclude, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is a bold and fascinating Bildungsroman in the sense that it deals with a seven-year-old girl. She is by no means the obvious Bildungsheld, especially during the time it was written where male protagonists dominated the genre. This thesis shows how Alice sets out as a weak, though curious, young child afraid of not fully knowing who she really is, lacking in integrity and confidence and how she ends up as a person displaying absolute control through being an astute player of games. The way her emotions nearly drown her in the pool of tears early in the novel is a superb demonstration of how sensitive emotions are for young and growing individuals, but also how weak Alice starts off in the novel as a child of seven. As the story progresses, however, so does Alice’s development in her coming of age – the chronological order of the events in the book mirror her growth. At the end of the novel, Alice has claimed full autonomy, being so strong that she is capable without difficulties to contradict and oppose the King and Queen of Hearts, the supreme rulers of Wonderland. By going her own way, Alice's development also corresponds to the attributes of modernity that are vital in the Bildungsroman genre.

The thesis also incorporates the aspect of feminism with Alice’s coming of age; feminism is an intriguing theme in the novel and an inspiring feature valuable to both women and men in the 19th century as well as in the present time. Through her experience-filled journey and her verbal and non-verbal actions, Alice becomes a role model and feminist heroine for young women and men. The central hypothesis of this study has implied that what Alice is exposed to and reacts to in Wonderland generally reflects the genre of a Bildungsroman and also specifically a feminist Bildungsroman. Throughout her journey in Wonderland, Alice meets confusing, mad, rude, ignorant and aggressive characters as well as the Cheshire Cat as an adviser, all of which contribute to her coming of age in the sense that
she learns something from the interactions and the world that results in a rise in her maturity through her mastery of the surreal world. Along the same lines, Alice also frequently encounters events where she is challenged and challenges characters herself in ways that are linked to her desire to claim gender equality. Alice does not desire to be inferior to others or be someone others take advantage of for being young and/or a female. With this, the thesis has suggested how representative Carroll’s novel is for the genre of both the Bildungsroman and the feminist Bildungsroman, with content that is relevant to the present day, especially on the basis of a feminist fictional work where Alice functions as a role model for a strong young woman fighting for equal gender rights. Further research could juxtapose Alice’s coming of age in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* with that of its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass* where Alice returns to Wonderland. In the sequel, Alice brings with her the experience she gained in her first visit. The second time round though, her coming of age continues on a different level. The question of feminism could be incorporated there too as it is also highly applicable to the latter literary work.
Works Cited


