

Following the white rabbit through time

Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in the latter half of the 19th century. Yet, the story has not only survived but remains a consistent source of inspiration for artists in every medium **By Candice Elizabeth Ashby**

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

In the latter half of the Victorian era, a little girl named Alice fell down a rabbit hole and found herself in a strange world where rules, as she knew them, did not apply. The adventures she experienced during her time in Wonderland set the tone for a new kind of novel.

A mathematician of sorts, English author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson working under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll played with logic in a way previous authors of children's literature had not.

One can see Carroll's strange but clever analogy for coming-of-age in Alice's first attempt to solve a problem. The logic of holding on to the door key as she grows and shrinks eludes her at first. Yet, the character is finally able to overcome her predicament and steps into Wonderland with a more mature, purposeful attitude. Her ability to adapt as a "grown-up" person makes a statement about the painful transition to adulthood and the eventual adjustment each person makes to maturity.

Similar themes can be found throughout the novel, and readers are compelled to wonder how much Alice represents the human condition. Perhaps, it is the very reason *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has stood the test of time. There is proof of Carroll's longevity evident across several artistic mediums.

In 1967, as part of their album *Surrealistic Pillow*, the band Jefferson Airplane wrote and recorded the song 'White Rabbit', which pulls so strongly from the original novel that there seems little difference between the two.

One pill makes you larger
And one pill makes you small
And the ones that mother gives you
Don't do anything at all
Go ask Alice
When she's ten feet tall

Two years after 'White Rabbit' was produced, artist Salvador Dali created 13 lithographs interpreting scenes



Illustrations: John Tenniel

from the original novel. These wonderfully colourful pieces, currently housed at the Espace Dali in Paris, are a playful abstraction of whimsical characters from the story. Later, Dali created a bronze statuette called Alice in Wonderland.

In 1999, the Wachowski brothers wrote and directed *The Matrix*, a film that contains many of the themes from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. One of the most famous scenes in the film depicts Morpheus offering Neo a red pill, to give him the opportunity to see 'just how deep the rabbit hole goes.'

The references in *The Matrix* to Carroll's novel are not subtle. Imagining that the main character Neo represents Alice, he too is compelled to follow the white rabbit, albeit in his case the white rabbit is a tattoo on the shoulder of



young woman. Still, the parallels between Alice and Neo are clear. Neo wakes up in a world that is as different to his previous world as Wonderland is to England.

What may be the most unexpected adaptation of the famous story is due to premier in London. The Royal Opera House will present *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 2011, choreographed by the award winning Christopher Wheeldon, a former Soloist of the New York City Ballet.

There may be other reasons for the popularity of this famous novel. The true appeal of Carroll's characters may be that they are curiously ambiguous. The white rabbit is ill-tempered, the caterpillar is contradictory and even Alice herself is a sort of silly girl, who verbalises every strange thought that streams from her consciousness.

Yet, despite the fluctuating temperaments of Carroll's characters, he doesn't attach to them the religious labels of 'good' and 'evil' as so many other children's authors have done with their own creations. Instead, the vagueness of the characters forms a more human environment, even in a place as strange and unfamiliar as Wonderland.

Even the Red Queen is not depicted as a typical "baddie" and in the end becomes so inconsequential as a villain, that Alice simply dismisses her as a 'nothing but a pack of cards.'

Carroll's ambiguous characters undoubtedly influenced other children's authors and even cartoon and filmmakers like Walt Disney in his early short films. More recently Hayao Miyazaki's films, which have won numerous accolades and awards, also depict characters that seem to be crafted from both light and dark giving them an added dimension.

The benefit of characters more thoroughly human - with flexible attitudes that range from Alice, the impertinent child to the Red Queen's anger management issues - perhaps touches upon the very soul of Carroll's work.

Instead of simply reading out the jumble of nonsense rhymes and anthropomorphic diatribe, readers identify with the characters. In the end, fans of the novel must ultimately admit that there is a little Alice in all of us.

