



Discussion Questions

At its heart, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a story about identity and the myriad ways it is constructed – one of the reasons the text has been used so often by psychoanalysts, linguists, and historians. APPR 2006 will look at the construction of identity in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the subsequent book *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in social, cultural, and generational contexts.

The Social Alice

Class

The characters in Lewis Carroll's stories frequently bump up against the constructs of class structure. Alice finds herself in situations where she is uncertain what is appropriate behavior and unclear about what is expected of her. Other characters try to assist her in identifying boundaries appropriate to her position.

- a. While class lines in our society are more relaxed than those of the author's time, can you think of examples where social awkwardness or class conflict still exist?
- b. Identify recent events reported by the media where class issues may have been in play or where the perception might have existed (EXAMPLE: Hurricane Katrina). What makes these incidents different from something that might have happened in the author's time? What similarities can you identify?
- c. What are some of the indicators of class status that can be found in the stories? What are some of the indicators of class status in our society? Identify differences and similarities.
- d. Does Alice's status change over the course of the text? If so, how does the change take place? If not, what are the obstacles she faces? What factors facilitate social mobility in our culture?
- e. Do individuals in our society identify themselves in terms of social class or status? Do we use class contexts to define each other? What happens to social constructs and class definitions when they are projected onto the global community?

Etiquette

Lewis Carroll's stories are a colorful portrayal of a very complex society. He uses Alice to examine social interaction, the rules and social etiquette we create for ourselves, and how these rules govern different aspects of our lives.

- a. At numerous points in the text Alice struggles to understand the importance of etiquette. When and how does Alice become aware of her "absence of proper manners"? What are her impressions of the customs and protocol she encounters?
- b. Etiquette is like "rules of engagement" for social situations. Think about how society's expectations of behavior – particularly that of children – have

changed or remained the same since the author's time. Some ideas to consider: table manners, roles for men and women, greetings, email protocol.

- c. Etiquette is part of what shapes a person's individuality. Alice must adjust her behavior in order to fit in, but must also maintain a sense of her own identity. Identify recent events reported by the media where cross-cultural encounters have produced social protocol conflicts. (EXAMPLES: gender roles and relationships in the global community; the introduction of female reporters to major sports reporting.)

Alice & Culture

Identity

Alice struggles with the importance and the instability of personal identity. She is constantly ordered to identify herself by the creatures she meets, but she has doubts about her identity, as well.

- a. What are the physical and behavior characteristics that make Alice "foreign" to the other characters? What are some of the challenges individuals face in cross-cultural encounters? What criteria do we use to determine the cultural identity of others – and ourselves? Consider characteristics such as eye contact, posture, greetings, and the role of the sexes.
- b. Identify instances in the text where cultural conflicts occur. Which characters are receptive to difference and which are not? Compare the cultural competency of our society to that of Wonderland.
- c. What are some ways a person's identity might change in response to a change in cultural environment? Consider the concepts of assimilation and segregation.
- d. Think about the "lens" Alice sees others through. What personal experiences and attributes combine to form an individual's cultural lens? How does this lens affect how we interpret other cultures?

Fantasy & Fairy Tales

Folklore and the treatment of fantasy are strong cultural indicators. The author's whimsical and fantastic treatment of social and political life reflects the extravagance and prosperity of the Victorian era.

- a. How do the stories characterize the social climate of the author's time? What are some of the popular fairy tales of our society and what do they indicate about our culture and attitudes? (EXAMPLES: Harry Potter, Star Wars.) What do you know about the folklore and fairy tales of other modern cultures?
- b. Fairy tales often capture the very real fears of an era or culture. Lewis Carroll frequently weaves mortality into the tales, particularly the mortality of children. What were the dangers faced by children in the 1800s? What are the dangers faced by children today? Are they reflected in modern literature and other media?

Language and logic/illogic

Lewis Carroll delights in puns. The Alice books are full of language games, to the reader's delight and Alice's confusion. The games often point out some inconsistency or slipperiness of language in general and English in particular.

- a. Even though there is no real language barrier for Alice, she has difficulty grasping the nuances of many verbal exchanges. How would this be amplified in situations where two or more languages or dialects are in play?

- b. Alice finds herself an outsider in a number of encounters, simply because she does not understand what is being said. When is language used to exclude others? How can it be used to promote inclusion?
- c. For the author, language is a source of joy and adaptability. In what ways do we utilize language as a celebration of culture? Currently in our society, what is the significance of language? Consider both cultural and political significance.
- d. The author depicts the difficulty of translating logic across cultural lines. How does Alice react when faced with something clearly illogical – from her point of view? How does this problem affect global relations at political and business levels? How can it affect interpersonal relationships?

Learning the Rules

Every new encounter in the text is something of a game for Alice; there are rules to learn, and consequences for learning or not learning those rules.

- a. What are some of the consequences Alice faces? While the encounters are treated as games in the stories, when can they become serious in the real world?
- b. Games are a constant part of life in Wonderland. There are social games and political games, each requiring adherence to a distinct set of rules. What do the characters' foibles say about life in the author's time? Consider what the author is trying to communicate through the text about the moral, political, and social climate of Victorian England. Think about the Caucus Race, the croquet match, and the portrayal of the royal court as a living deck of cards.
- c. Learning the rules is a metaphor for the adaptations to new social situations. Mastering each challenge, Alice grows wiser and more adaptable as time goes on. What are some formal sets of rules individuals in our society must learn? What are some of the informal rules that govern our behavior?

Alice Across Generations

Adult vs. child reality

Lewis Carroll adored the unprejudiced and innocent way young children approach the world. He wanted to describe how a child sees the adult world by looking through Alice's eyes at the complexity and confusion of adulthood.

- a. Lessons about the adult world are often difficult for children, who must learn how they are expected to behave or believe without understanding why. How would Alice's experience have been improved if someone had explained to her why things happen the way they do in Wonderland? What elements of our society are difficult for children to understand? How and when are they explained? Consider the political process, skill and career development, and gender roles.
- b. Alice must shift from being the central figure in her own reality, to being an insignificant and even offensive element of the culture of Wonderland. When do children in our society become engaged in adult interactions? What are some of the milestones and rites of passage that indicate acceptance in adult circles? How do these differ from those of the author's time?

Growth into adulthood

Alice's adventures parallel the journey from childhood to adulthood. Though faced with numerous challenges, she shows marked progress throughout the book.

- a. In the beginning, Alice can barely maintain enough composure to keep herself from crying. By the end of the novel, she is self-possessed and able to hold her own against the most baffling Wonderland logic. What has prompted this change? How have her experiences in Wonderland prepared her for adult life? Can you identify parallels in our society?
- b. Rights and responsibilities change as we mature. What responsibilities and rights does Alice take on over the course of the text? What are some of the key rights and responsibilities that young people are afforded in our culture as they mature?
- c. The dramatic changes in Alice's size that occur throughout the stories hint at the radical changes an individual undergoes during adolescence. Alice is unprepared for the transformations. How does she react? How do her experiences parallel what might occur in the life of a young person today?
- d. Alice's changes in size also bring about a change in perspective, and she sees the world from a very different view. Over the course of the text she becomes a much stronger, self-possessed person, able to speak out against the nonsensical reality of Wonderland. Identify an example from your own life where an experience gave you information that made you stronger or better equipped to face a challenge.

Intergenerational interaction

Even though one thing all humans share is the passage from infancy through childhood, into adulthood and old age, we are remarkably imperceptive in our dealings with those of other generations.

- a. Several characters in the book are disrespectful of others because of their perceived age or experience; Alice is treated as inferior because she is a child and, in turn, treats her elders in a rude or discounting manner. How is this a reflection of maturity? How is it a reflection of the author's times?
- b. Valuing individuals across generational lines is an important aspect of cultural competency. How are different generations portrayed in modern media? Are these portrayals conducive to respectful relationships? Where in our society do different generations interact? How else do individuals develop an understanding of individuals from different generations?

The eternal child

Alice represents both the willful child and the whimsical child. Both are characteristics with the potential to appear as positive and negative traits.

- a. By the end of the text, Alice has evolved into a mature and competent individual. What aspects of her willfulness serve her well in her new capacity? How might her willfulness be detrimental? What aspects of her whimsical side serve her well as an adult? How might she be disadvantaged by her whimsical nature?
- b. In our culture, we often label individuals who have retained some of the characteristics of childhood. What factors make some of these labels positive and some negative? (EXAMPLES: Peter Pan Syndrome, young at heart.) What is the value or danger of thinking like a child in different adult settings?

Some of the concepts used in the creation of these themes came from www.gradesaver.com and from www.alice-in-wonderland.net.