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Research Article

Is Chaos really Chaos in Alice's Wonderland?

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Abstract

Order is chaos, chaos is order.

Scientific discoveries have always kept mankind on the hooks. Be it Copernicus or Galileo, Einstein or Stephen Hawking, something new has always been added to the ultimate phenomenon called 'Science'. One such theory that brought about a revolution in the scientific world in the 1960s is Chaos theory. Putting all the scientists in awe, it forced them to question their beliefs about nature and its actions: a new theory that proposed everything that appears to be organized and well structured is, in reality, a mosaic of ordered chaos and that which looks to be un-organized and non-structured, in fact, follows a pattern which makes it look like chaos. Every disorder is an order of disorder. Since literature is also closely linked to Chaos theory, the present paper endeavours to explore the same via Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has been critically analyzed from various points of view. This paper, however, will attempt to show how the text is closely connected to chaos theory. The chaos that ensues in Wonderland is not chaos in actuality.

Keywords: Science and Literature, Chaos theory, Alice's Wonderland, Order and disorder, Non-linear structures

“What a wonderful dream it had been!” (Carroll, 1865, p. 189)

When Alice retorts this at the end of the book to herself, the reader is left with a baffling question in mind. Was it really wonderful? All that Alice went through, and through Alice the

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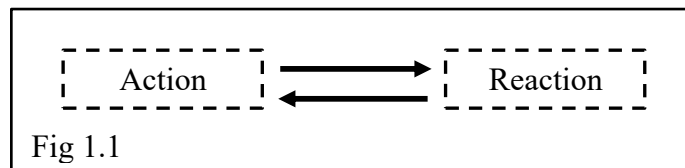
reader went through, was all nonsensical. So peeved is Alice by it, that she loses her calm at the end and blurts out “stuff and nonsense!” (p. 167) In fact, Alice wakes up from her dream in utter frustration because none of the Wonderland creatures can understand her, and she is unable to relate to them. Then, what made Alice say so?

Alice's Wonderland has been analyzed numerous times. Studies have shown that Carroll uses Wonderland as a metaphorical place where Alice can grow up and parodies the above-world adults through all the “queer” characters of Wonderland. Other critics maintain that Alice's adventures are just a re-manifestation of the sanity of the above-world where Alice comes from. By showing every now and then the “curiouser and curiouser” (p. 15) things take a chaotic turn in Wonderland, Carroll has re-emphasized that order is prevalent in the above-world only. Another thought process claims that everything that exists in Wonderland is not only illogical but also inconsistent and uncertain.

A newly formed study confirms the above assumptions and adds one thing different from what has already been said: *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* follows a pattern that is not visible at first glance. Rather, it narrates a story that is only seemingly disordered. Each chapter of the story only appears to be an isolated episode. They are, in fact, part of a whole that attempts to complete Alice's journey into the comprehension of the adult world, and the trial scene at the end of the novel is the pinnacle point in her journey.

II

Logical positivism, a concept the scientific world strongly believed in from the renaissance to the nineteenth century, stated that everything can be explained logically. Nothing happens by chance. Everything is already planned. When Newton proposed his law of mechanics- “to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”, the world seemed to believe it without any questions.



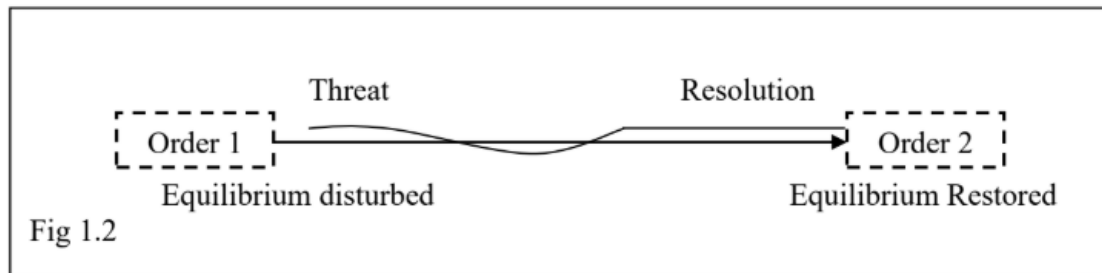
Newton suggested that the world is a machine, and since a machine can be controlled, so can the world. If one can understand its laws, it cannot only be controlled but modified as well. The world, in short, *is* predictable. There is no room for randomness, chance, or uncertainty.

Literature, too, followed the strands of logical positivism. Till the end of the nineteenth century, authors presented what was expected of them. If, at all, a few presented something different from their time or action, the element of uncertainty present in their work was pushed under the carpet or justified as an act of God and He knows what He is doing- so no human is to question anything.

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Be it any genre, a particular pattern was always followed, and linearity was thus maintained. Threads were closely knit. Everything happened chronologically. Threats existed in the text, but the action always reached a resolution. In short, everything was under the influence of poetic justice.



Nevertheless, during the 1960s, a weather forecast negated all that had been accepted, affecting the scientific as well as the literary world. The birth of Chaos theory put into question the scientific notions so far established.

The emergence of Chaos theory was highly controversial: the theory proposed that everything was unpredictable, yet this unpredictability followed a pattern. Earlier systems believed that minute changes could hardly matter, and if at all they did, the change they brought was hardly of any magnitude. “The basic idea of western science is that you don't have to take into account the falling of a leaf on some planet in another galaxy when you're trying to account for the motion of a billiard ball on a pool table on earth. Very small influences can be neglected.” (Gleick. 1998. p. 15)

However, chaos theory proposed that a minute change in any process was capable of instigating a change as destructive as a tornado. That is to say that the flapping of butterfly wings in Japan may cause a hurricane in New York. As Gleick says, “In science as in life, it is well known that a chain of events can have a point of crisis that could magnify small changes, but Chaos meant that such points were everywhere. They were pervasive” (p. 23) and could lead to events that could prove to be highly lethal.

Earlier non-linearity could be ignored as scientists studied the systems locally by segregating the mechanisms first and then adding them back. But Chaos theory underlined the fact that to understand the mechanisms completely everything must be looked at together- all at the same time.

An amalgamation of mathematics and physics, this theory studied linearity and order amidst unpredictable, random, and erratic disorder and thrived on two main ideas: one, everything achieves consistency, yet it is not known when, how, where, and why or whether the consistency would come at the price of inconsistency; second, even the minutest change, sooner or later, has the power to change the whole course of action. Accordingly, no order is a fixed order in nature. Things that appear to be well structured and organized are actually formed out of an order of chaos.

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In essence, Chaos theory showed that within the arena of a finite product, there is an infinite boundary to be scrutinized.

III

“If you knew the algorithm and fed it back say ten thousand times, each time there'd be a dot somewhere on the screen. You'd never know where to expect the next dot. But gradually you'd start to see this shape, because every dot will be inside the shape of this leaf... The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. (Stoppard, 1993, Act 1, Scene: 4)

While explaining Chaos theory to Hannah Jarvis in *Arcadia*, Valentine coincidentally links mathematics directly to the world of art hinting very strongly that there exists a robust connection between the two forces- science and literature, which now brings us to evaluate how *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has a strong presence of Chaos theory.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was written as a gift to Alice Liddell who was Carroll's favourite amongst all the three sisters. Carroll often narrated stories spontaneously to the three Liddell sisters and on Alice's request was compelled to note them down intricately later. The origin of this fact is traceable in the beginning of the book where the writer tells us how the very idea of writing this book was generated.

All in the golden afternoon
Full leisurely we glide;
... Ah, cruel three! In such an hour,
Beneath such dreamy weather,
To beg a tale of breath too weak
To stir the finest feather!
Yet what can one poor voice avail
Against three tongues together? (Carroll, 1865, p. i)

Through the poem, the reader is also prepared for what he is to find in the book. The poem warns the reader that it may be difficult to understand what's happening in the book because “there will be nonsense in it.” (p. ii) And like Alice, whenever she meets a new character during her adventure, the reader might interrupt, “not more than once a minute” (p. ii) thinking what is happening. This also proves that *Wonderland* was a well-thought-out plan where nonsense was purposely used in its creation. Carroll was definitely aware of what he was doing.

Carroll tells his reader that there'll be a “dream-child moving through a land/ Of wonders wild and new”. (p. ii) Yet the reader continues his journey with Alice, believing everything that takes place to be true. Thus begins Alice's adventures.

When the book begins, Alice's eyes fall on “a white rabbit with pink eyes” speaking to himself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late.” (p. 2) Alice remains unmoved at this because she finds “nothing so very remarkable in that... it all seemed quite natural.” (p. 2) What moves Alice is the

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fact that the Rabbit is wearing a waist-coat pocket and a watch, for she had never before seen anything of that sort. Alice's journey into the circle of chaos starts from here, from the moment she refuses to recognize the unusualness of a speaking rabbit. She is only astonished when the waist-coat pocket and the watch come into the picture. This shows that her adventures are not with something that is unusual but with something that she is not familiar with.

Alice jumps down the rabbit hole “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.” (p. 3) This becomes her second step. Her fall indicates a turn in her life. What is to become of her now is quite unpredictable. Even though the reader knows she will come out safe, how, what, and why are the questions that perplex the reader till the end.

When Alice falls down, she doesn't have “a moment to think about stopping herself [because she finds herself] falling down a very deep well.” (p. 3) This deep well may indicate her journey in her own thoughts (which actually is since she is only dreaming.)

When the writer says, “She had plenty of time as she went down to look about her” (p. 3), he only means to say that the fall is slowly taking her into the realms of chaos where she will have to analyze herself. While Alice is falling down, she continuously thinks, and her thoughts have constant back-and-forth movements in them, just like a pendulum. This is seen throughout the book. Alice is never stable for a minute. She is constantly on the move. Her aim is to reach the lovely garden she saw while she was in the long, dark passage after her fall. After reaching the garden, Alice is again on her heels to experience more and more of Wonderland. However, this movement is erratic. Her thoughts go to A, from A to C; instead of coming back to A, they shift to D and then move back to B. There is a seemingly random pattern running throughout the book.

One more fascinating thing about Alice's movements is that her seemingly random movements are not only to and fro but also up and down. As we have seen in all the episodes, Alice's size is highly inconsistent, as is her stay at a particular place. There is no fixed amount of time that Alice is going to spend at a particular place or height. Not a moment passes when Alice shuts up like a telescope to ten inches height, and a few minutes later, she is nine feet tall. Later again, she is two feet and is almost about to disappear, and a few minutes later, she is of a giant's size again. Shortly after that, in Chapter Four, she reduces to three inches in height, from three inches to almost a completely shut telescope, and afterward tall with a neck like that of a serpent. There is constant inconsistency, yet what is remarkable here is that each movement brings about a different development in Alice. Alice learns to comprehend her surroundings gradually. That is why she is able to stabilize her size once she understands how to eat the mushroom. After that, never once does Alice face a problem as to her size when she meets the Frog-footman or the Duchess, the cook, the Cheshire Cat, the Mad-Hatter, the March Hare, or the Dormouse. She understands when and why she needs to keep herself tall or short and does so accordingly.

Wonderland also brings into question Alice's linguistic competence and identity, which Alice can only mend by learning the ways of Wonderland. By Chapter Five, she has learned how

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to take control of her size. However, her linguistic competence is still undeveloped, and her identity as to who she is is still a mystery to her. “Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, *that's* the great puzzle!” (p. 19) She was sure who she was when she got up in the morning, “but I think I must have changed several times since then.” (p. 60) Her lack of linguistic competence leads the reader to this play of words and to the serious predicament of her identity. 'Identity is created when the subject position within a discourse creates relations to elements, which are discursively unfixed signifiers, and fixes them into discursively stable moments. However, they make it clear that “no discursive formation is a sutured totality and the transformation of the elements into moments is never complete” (Laclau and Mouffe 106-107).

This means that “moments” may change and develop new meanings. This is what happens with Alice. Since her surroundings have changed, so has the meaning of rules and order. What Alice believed could never change, actually changes drastically and constantly. That is her 'self'; her identity and the aids she uses to re-emphasize her identity fail her because their meanings also change. This is shown through the arbitrary use of language and her predicament to understand it in Chapter Five when she meets the Caterpillar.

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

“What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar, sternly. “Explain yourself!”

“I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir,” said Alice, “because I'm not myself, you see.”

“I don't see,” said the Caterpillar.

“I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly,” Alice replied, very politely, “for I can't understand it myself.” (p. 60)

Alice's estrangement from her 'self' comes with her not identifying the technicalities of language and her inability to hold her tongue, think, and talk. This also happens because Alice believes everything takes systematic development. There is an order followed in order to establish another order, and Wonderland teaches her that nothing of this sort exists. Creating sense out of nonsense is what happens in the above-world as well. This can be said because the creatures in Wonderland represent adults in child form, and Alice's inability to understand their language and remarks means she is unable to understand an adult in reality.

IV

If observed closely, Wonderland has two distinct and important circular motions. The first cycle starts from Alice's jump from the rabbit hole and ends when Alice comes back to the same dark hall where her journey in Wonderland had started- that is in Chapter Eight after the tea party

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with the Hatter. The first cycle marks the development of her thinking process and teaches her to process her thoughts carefully.

When Alice meets all the strange people and finally comes out of the dark, long passage with other creatures while saving herself from drowning in the pool of tears and goes ahead on her journey, her experiences may seem to frustrate her and put her in more disbelief, but she is actually learning how to handle herself. From the mouse, to the birds, then to the White Rabbit, to the lizard, from there to the duchess, to the frog, to the baby, to the Cheshire cat, to the Caterpillar, to the mad tea-party and back to the same place where she started shows that Alice has just been through a cognitive development and has completed the first stage of development that is the first cycle.

The second circle puts this development to the test. What she has attained is tested in the second circle when she enters the garden, this time more cautiously. She encounters more adventures and meets some more characters like the cards, the Mock Turtle, the Gryphon, the King, and the Queen. It starts from the beautiful garden where Alice wanted to go right from the beginning, and the circle gets complete in the scene where Alice finally defies her contemporaries and clears her test.

It is intriguing how the garden was presented initially and how it turned out at the end. The garden, when Alice first gets a glimpse of it, is very beautiful and lovely, and when Alice is actually there, she realizes that the beauty is actually artificial; even the roses are painted in red because the queen of hearts demands it. Secondly, the garden, in reality, becomes the platform of death, where the croquet game is played, but the pawns in the game are live creatures. This signifies that what appears to be may not be a reality, a fact that runs in the above-world as well.

Although Alice constantly searches for something “normal” to happen in Wonderland, wherein the word normal signifies the orderliness of her world, she herself wishes the contrary when she wants to get into the garden in the beginning. “Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope!” (9)

Likewise, Alice, at every turn, ends up doing something that is against the rules of the above-world and yet questions the principles of Wonderland. This is easily perceptible when, despite knowing that a cake or a potion is going to make her tall or short, Alice eats or drinks it.

The cognitive process of a child goes through a lot of stages. These stages, in the normal human world, are well-defined. There are systems followed. The stages are clearly recorded for one's better understanding. But for Alice, and for every child, this process is an adventure in itself as the whole process undergoes a chaotic change. This appears to be chaotic as the language or the understanding of Alice's adventure world is far more different from the world where Alice is actually growing. Each new experience is a learning experience for her as she is still trying to adapt to the ways of Wonderland, where every character she meets is an adult in the guise of a child or

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a child in the guise of an adult. And by adapting to the ways of Wonderland, she is indirectly adapting to the ways of her own world.

To conclude, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* needs to be looked at as a whole. It is not merely a series of loosely connected episodes but a disconnection that brings about a connection between the fantasy world and the real world through the use of nonsense where nonsense, in its pure form, as described by James Kincaid, "is not frightening but deeply reassuring, since it only appears to be disorderly and actually establishes so many structures and limits that it functions to keep disorder in check." (1973, p. 92)

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