

# FANTASY OR REALITY?: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CHARACTERIZATION OF YOUNG GIRLS IN *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND & OZMA OF OZ*

*Jennifer L. Lee*

*Writer's comment:* John Boe's English 180 class (Children's Literature) was a refreshing change from many of the classes I had taken on campus. Here was a chance to relive my childhood by re-reading all of the novels I had enjoyed when I was little, and I seized the opportunity wholeheartedly. Selecting a topic for my paper, though, was not so easy - after all, how can you choose between such books as *Charlotte's Web*, *The Secret Garden* and *Dragonwings*? I finally decided to compare Dorothy Gale of the Oz series and Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* as a way to analyze how young girls are portrayed in literature and to reflect upon my own experiences as a young girl.

— *Jennifer L. Lee*

*Instructor's comment:* I offer two options for the Children's Literature term paper: one traditional (to compare and contrast two works) and one alternative (designed to bring out personal voice and personal experience). Jennifer Lee's marvelous essay combines both modes. She develops with ingenuity and sophistication a literary argument, that Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* is a realistic depiction of a little girl while Dorothy in *Ozma of Oz* is an idealized depiction of one. But she also gracefully brings in her own experience, so she never seems to be generalizing abstractly about what children are like, but rather to be making accurate observations on the basis of her own knowledge (having herself been a little girl). With the courage to connect her own life with her literary analysis, Jennifer ends up with jewel of a paper that has both an intellectual argument and a personal voice, both a brain and a heart.

— *John Boe, English Department*

**L**EWIS CARROLL'S ALICE AND L. FRANK BAUM'S DOROTHY are two of the most well-known and well-loved heroines of all time. At first glance, both Alice and Dorothy appear to be rather accurate renditions of actual little girls who embark on their own adventures in strange and fantastical lands. However, closer scrutiny reveals that only one of these characters is a true portrayal of what a little girl is really like, while the other is but a fulfillment of what most girls would only dream of being like.

Like many young girls across the world, both today and in centuries past, it seems that Alice was taught the etiquette that all proper young ladies should follow. Throughout the novel, we see Alice in conflict with certain societal rules - there are several occasions when she is frustrated with what others say and do to her. But only those privy to her innermost thoughts (i.e., the readers) are capable of seeing her true feelings on any matter, for she remains, with the exception of an episode at the end of the text, extremely courteous to all those she meets. One of the passages that clearly describes this general acquiescence is when Alice sees the Duchess after meeting the King and Queen on the croquet-ground:

“Tut, tut, child!” said the Duchess. “Every thing’s got a moral, if only you can find it.” And she squeezed herself up closer to Alice’s side as she spoke.

Alice did not much like her keeping so close to her: first, because the Duchess was very ugly; and secondly, because she was exactly the right height to rest her chin on Alice’s shoulder, and it was an uncomfortably sharp chin. However, she did not like to be rude: so she bore it as well as she could. (131-132)

I can strongly relate to Alice’s predicament, as growing up in a rather traditional Chinese family taught me from a very young age to be polite to my elders and to respect others. In our culture, it is considered extremely rude and dishonorable if you show your anger in public. On the other hand, it is a mark of sophistication and good breeding if you can control your temper and treat everyone with goodwill.

Like Alice, Dorothy follows society’s rules of conduct to the utmost of her ability; there are even times when she goes out of her way to make sure that she, as well as the characters that she is responsible for, acts properly. This is clearly illustrated when she encounters Billina after her fight with a rooster in Princess Langwidere’s chicken-yard: “‘I don’t approve of this, at all,’ she said, carrying Billina away toward the palace. ‘It isn’t a good thing for you to associate with those common chickens. They would soon spoil your good manners, and you wouldn’t be respectable any more’” (90-91).

This passage is one of the most memorable passages in *Alice* because it so resembles the typical conversation that young girls often have with their dolls at imaginary tea parties. Imitating what their own mothers say to them over and over again - “Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to,” “Don’t shift in your seat while your elders are talking to you,” “You must be a proper young lady” - these young girls try to come to terms with all of the social restrictions that are placed upon them and to release some of the frustrations that come with these restrictions.

All that said, there are several instances when Dorothy finds herself having to bypass rules in favor of standing up for what she believes in - defending what is rightfully hers. On these occasions, she shows tremendous courage in speaking her mind, for she must defy individuals who are older and more powerful than she. For example, when Princess Langwidere decides that she wants Dorothy’s head for her collection, Dorothy refuses to agree to her scheme and, instead, calmly accepts her fate of being locked in a tower:

“I don’t know anything about your No. 2, and I don’t want to,” said Dorothy, firmly. “I’m not used to taking cast-off things, so I’ll just keep my own head.”

“You refuse?” cried the Princess, with a frown.

“Of course I do,” was the reply. (69-70)

Dorothy’s courage is accompanied by a sense of always knowing the right thing to do. There never seems to be a time that she makes a wrong decision. Things always turn out all right for her, whether it be winding up Tik-tok to see what he will do (38), choosing which of the Nome King’s ornaments is a member of the royal family of Ev (151-154), or taking the Nome King’s magic belt (179). Even when she has not completely decided what course of action she should take, she accepts whatever fate has in store for her before she acts. Perhaps the clearest instance of this is when she is first blown off the ship and floats away in the chicken-coop: “She was wet and uncomfortable, it is true, but, after sighing that one sigh I told you of, she managed to recall some of her customary cheerfulness and decided to patiently await whatever her fate might be” (10).

Alice, on the other hand, has moments when she questions how she is to act in given situations, whether they be make-believe or real. Sometimes her actions even get her into trouble with those around her, as when she mentions her cat Dinah a few too many times to the animals she meets in the Pool of Tears:

“And who is Dinah, if I might venture to ask the question?” said the Lory.

Alice replied eagerly, for she was always ready to talk about her pet:

“Dinah’s our cat. And she’s such a capital one for catching mice, you can’t think! And oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she’ll eat a little bird as soon as to look at it!”

This speech caused a remarkable sensation among the party...On various pretexts they all moved off, and Alice was soon left alone. (39-40)

Often, Alice admits (at least to the reader) that she goes through a *process* of deciding what to do, instead of making an immediate decision and acting upon it. One example of this is when she considers what might happen if she eats the cake marked “EAT ME” - “‘Well, I’ll eat it,’ said Alice, ‘and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door’” (13). No less important, perhaps, is her curiosity, which often causes her to turn her questions around and deal with much more mature issues. A favorite question of hers seems to be how it would feel to disappear altogether... “‘it might end, you know,’ said Alice to herself, ‘in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?’” (11)

What is more, Carroll’s Alice makes it clear that it is all right to be solitary at certain times. Her only “friend” seems to be the Cheshire Cat, who is not what most of us would call a friend in the true sense of the word. Dorothy, on the other hand, seems to have the innate ability to gather friends wherever she goes, beginning with the time that she finds herself in a chicken-coop in the middle of the sea and ending with the time that she leaves the Land of Oz. This is the dream that all children have, to be liked and admired by everyone, and to have a multitude of playmates with whom to share their games and adventures. Even the characters Dorothy meets seem more fantastic than those Alice comes across. Whereas Alice encounters such typical animals as a rabbit, a worm, a dormouse, and card gardeners, Dorothy encounters exotic creatures that children love to fantasize about. These range anywhere from the Cowardly Lion to the Hungry Tiger - even a living sawhorse and talking scarecrow.

Certain aspects of schooling are incorporated into many of Alice’s adventures as well, integrating nursery rhymes and facts from textbooks with ordinary conversation. Such references to education can be found throughout the novel, including Alice’s monologue as she falls down the rabbit-hole (4-5), the English history lesson Alice listens to when Mouse tries to dry everyone off after Alice has cried her pool of tears (30-32), and the tales the Mock Turtle tells Alice about his own schooling (142-146). Although many children would probably rather not be reminded that they have to attend lessons, Lewis Carroll uses

this aspect of Alice to make her character more in tune with reality.

Any mention of attending school is entirely eliminated in Dorothy's adventures, however. The idea of being able to play all day without the threat of homework is again, of course, any child's fantasy, and can easily be illustrated by the familiar verse that children chant when school is let out for the summer: "No more teachers, no more books! No more teacher's dirty looks!" (I clearly remember a time when my own mother used to ask me if I wanted to play hooky from school and spend the day with her, so, even now, I can relate to a child's need for escape from the educational system, even if only through a book.)

While both Alice and Dorothy are meant to be portraits of typical young girls, I believe that they represent two different facets of a young girl's nature. Carroll's Alice undoubtedly portrays the true image of what real young girls are like, possessing some qualities that may not be considered extremely attractive but are nevertheless present in the lives of young women. On the other hand, Baum's Dorothy is more fantastic, a heroine who encompasses all the qualities that any young girl would like to have but cannot always attain. Together, then, the two characters make up everything that a young girl is - the influences and restrictions that society places on her, the unspoken thoughts that she has when speaking to others, the dreams that she wishes to aspire to.