

The Age of Alice: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Nonsense in Victorian England

Alice and the Question of Victorian Childhood

By Lydia Murdoch

“Who in the world am I? Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle!” [\[1\]](#) So reflects Alice after she has fallen down the rabbit hole and changed size, first “shutting up like a telescope” until she is only ten inches high, and then “opening out like the largest telescope that ever was”. [\[2\]](#) Literary scholars have identified the existential themes of identity in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), but the question “Who in the world am I?” applied much more broadly to Victorian childhood overall. [\[3\]](#) From the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign in 1837 to her death in 1901, what it meant to be a child transformed dramatically—a process that *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* both marked and took in new directions by presenting a fresh example of active, questioning girlhood.

The first lines of Carroll’s story identify Alice as a particular class of child—one who, unlike most mid-Victorian children, spent her days in leisure and education. “Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do,” wrote Carroll. She initiates her adventures after dismissing the book her sister was reading “without pictures or conversations” as utterly uninteresting. *Alice’s Adventures*, published just five years before the 1870 Education Act introduced a national system of elementary schools for all children, is filled with earnest lessons reworked into nonsensical jabber. Again and again, seeking to find meaning in the disorderly world below, Alice turns to her memorized drills, only to have them

fail her. After questioning her identity, she sets out to “try if I know all the things I used to know,” starting first with the multiplication tables—“four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh dear!”—and then moving on to geography: “London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome, and Rome—no, *that’s* all wrong, I’m certain!”^[5] Yet even amidst all this confusion, Alice never loses sight of her class bearings. She proudly tells the Mock Turtle that she attends a day school with lessons in French and music, and when he asks whether she studies washing, too, she indignantly replies, “Certainly not!”^[6]

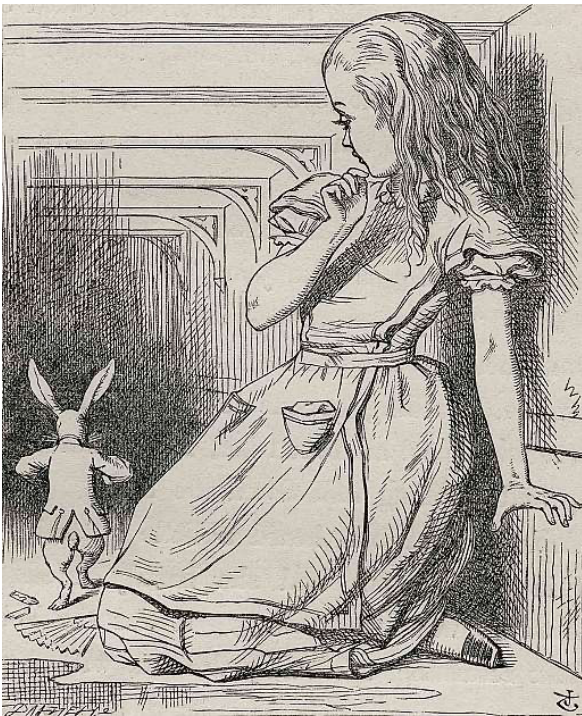


Figure 1 John Tenniel's illustration of an oversized Alice crouched in the underground hallway

Victorian ideals of childhood thus remained contingent on class identity, but Alice's puzzlements in Wonderland also mirrored earlier debates from the 1830s and 1840s over child workers in British factories and mines. Child labor was by no means new to nineteenth-century industrial Britain. By the 1830s, however, increasing numbers of reformers presented the harsh discipline, physical demands, and long hours of industrial labor as incompatible with the

physical, emotional, and moral needs of young children. The Factory Act of 1833, passed the year after Carroll's birth, banned all children under nine from working in textile mills and limited working hours of youths between the ages of nine and thirteen to a mere forty-eight hours per week. The following decade, the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842 prohibited all children under ten—as well as all females—from working underground. For Victorian readers, John Tenniel's illustration of an oversized Alice crouched in the underground hallway wet with the pool of tears would have likely evoked the confinement, isolation, and endangerment of child miners (figure 1). The widely read and reproduced *First Report of the Children's Employment Commission* (1842) included stark drawings of other children who had not fallen down the rabbit hole, but been lowered down the mine shaft by adults. The most provocative image from the 1842 *Report* showed a young girl, naked to the waist and barefoot, crawling on all fours, the chain between her legs attached to the cart of coal that she pulled through the wet narrow passageway (figure 2). While these paired images approached the question of childhood from very different perspectives, they both revealed worlds in which the very spaces and demands placed on children proved incompatible with their needs.

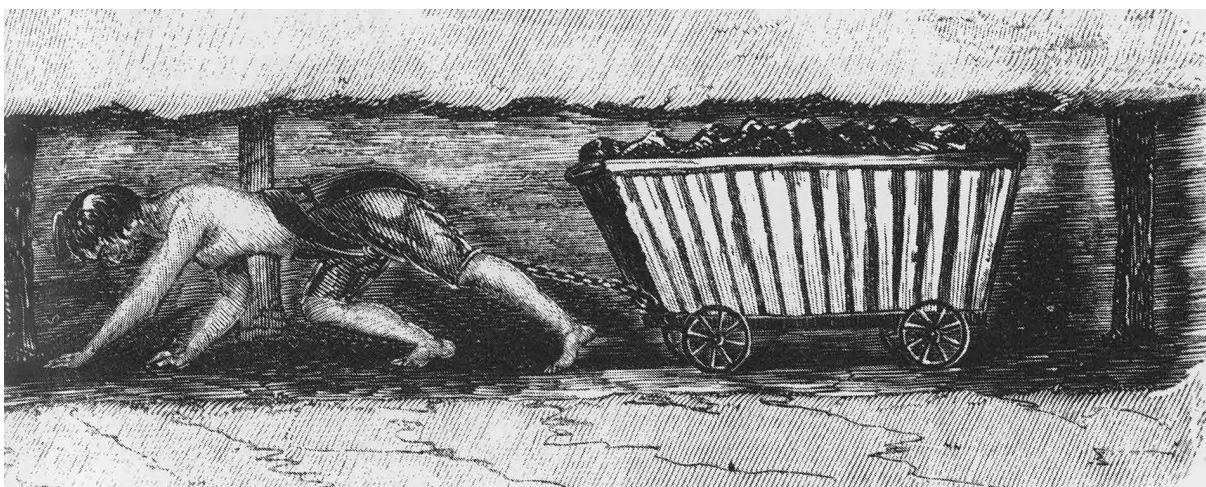


Figure 2 Illustration from the *First Report of the Children's Employment Commission* (1842)

Alice's reliance on school drills to check her ever-changing identity also mirrors the 1842 *Report*, in which parliamentary investigators applied the test of knowledge to evaluate the effects of hard labor on child development. Most of the child workers interviewed for the *Report* had never attended school, or only a Sunday school. Their recorded answers to the interviewers' questions sound strikingly similar to Alice's nonsensical attempts to recall her lessons. "Fifteen-year-old Bessy Bailey claimed, "22 pence is 3 shillings and 1 pence. I don't know how many weeks there are in the year. I don't know what Ireland is, whether it is a town or a country." He continued, displaying a great aptitude for monetary calculations (as many of the children did), but little understanding of abstract mathematics: "20 pence is 1 shilling and 8 pence; 32 pence is 2 shillings and 8 pence; 7 times 3 is 32—no, it's 22." Twelve-year-old Isaac Bearer was a jumble of contradictions: "I have learnt religion pretty well. I don't know who Jesus Christ was: I never heard of him. I've learnt the Church Catechism: but I don't know it all. I don't know what is the largest town in England. Three time[s] ten is twenty." [8] Highly selective in their questioning, the parliamentary investigators compiled hundreds of statements of evidence such as these to reinforce the point that workers as young as six who spent most of their lives underground were not allowed to become *children*. Stunted in their growth, harnessed like animals, and ignorant of basic religious and civic knowledge, child workers defied the ideals of domesticity and childhood that were becoming so central to middle-class identity by the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign and thus legitimated intervention and protections from the otherwise *laissez-faire* government.