

Mirrors Mocking the Victorian Ethos: Through the Looking-Glass

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Abstract

Victorian England witnessed large scale and multi-dimensional progress. There was a lot to celebrate and honour but simultaneously, this rapid pace of development created a void in the personal lives of Victorians. In the race of gaining more, people ended up losing solace, peace of mind, cultural values and significance of emotions. Capitalism conquered the hearts of Victorian people. Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* takes us back into the 19th century and shows us the contemporary scenario with the perspective of a child. This paper deals with Lewis Carroll's vision of contemporary England and the drawbacks of such a blind race and materialism.

Keywords: Victorian Ethos, Sarcasm, Children, Capitalism, Isolation, Industrialisation, Mannerisms.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson or Lewis Carroll was born as the third child of Reverend Charles Dodgson and Francis Jane Lutwidge on 27 January 1832 in Cheshire, England. His father was believed to be an austere, puritanical and authoritative Victorian man while his mother was the essence of Victorian 'gentlewoman'.

Carroll's childhood was simple and uneventful. Most of his time was spent in the company of his siblings. He had the problem of stammering and it became worst in presence of adults. He panicked and blushed in the company of elder people. This problem of stammering made him a sort of loner and he found escape in puzzles, games and fantasy world. His sense of loneliness and isolation during childhood is reflected through his protagonist Alice. Carroll had many siblings and major part of his childhood was spent looking after his seven sisters. He became fond of kids especially little girls. Carroll cooked stories to amuse them and also began composing poems, fantasy plays, marionette shows, etc. Carroll's formal schooling began at the age of 12 when he was admitted in Richmond grammar school but till then he had already gained a fair proportion of background in literature from his family library. Instead of English literature, it was Mathematics that amused him and he studied and taught it at Oxford University. He desired to play rugby but couldn't play because of rigid bullying atmosphere. He completed his undergraduate studies in 1854 and it was the year when he initiated his poetry publication

in *The Whitby Gazette*. In 1857, he took his Master's degree. He immersed himself in literature and also took up photography, a hobby that made him one of the best photographers of Victorian England.

Victorian England witnessed unparalleled change and progress in various spheres of life. It was an age of industrialization and mechanical development. Factories were established, production rose as a result of which England's economy boosted, employment generated and rural-urban migration initiated. Elementary education became mandatory after the passing of Education Acts. Reading audience augmented, publication of books became cheaper, large number of novels and journals were published. Education brought political and social awakening among the citizens of England. Press became a powerful force influencing the opinions of masses. In political sphere, the supremacy of feudal aristocrats was brought to an end by the Reform Bill of 1832. Struggle for electoral reforms continued. Further reform bills of 1868 and 1884-85 transformed the oligarchic England to the crowned republic. Feudalism gradually disappeared and a positive air of democracy blew. But there were also the negative impacts of such a rapid development. Industrialisation resulted in social troubles such as sprawling slums on the outskirts of cities, degrading landscape, increased child labour and exploitation of cheap labour. Capitalism compelled everyone to focus on their material gains and this caused a neglect of traditional and spiritual values. Gap between the rich and the poor widened. Democratic protests caused unrest and sometimes situation became extremely tensed.

The Victorian Era was marked by immense industrialization, development and progress. Society was becoming more and more capitalist, materially affluent, politically vigilant and scientifically advanced. It was an age of turbulent social change. Man was trying to find a balance between the new and the old world, a compromise between science and religion, progress and stability, democracy and aristocracy. It is in this context that Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll penned down the social scenario from the perspective of a child. This paper will attempt to analyze how Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* simultaneously portrays and mocks the Victorian ethos of 19th century England.

Alice, the child protagonist in *Through the Looking-Glass* reflects the isolation of kids in Victorian society where they were not treated as children but groomed to become adults with no recreation and friends. Alice is often left to herself and cats. She talks to them, teaches them manners and remains in their company for hours without any interruption from her parents, a nanny or other children. The First chapter opens with Alice talking to her cat and discussing with it the manners, punishments and the game of chess. The novel ends with Alice trying to convince her kitty that she was the Red Queen while contemplating whose dream it was? "Now kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question...it must have been either me or the Red King". (Carroll, 2018, p-97).

This clearly depicts her remoteness from other people. In Victorian society while the poor children were hired for cheap labour in factories, mines, textile mills and prostitution, the children in richer household were most probably left with a governess who taught them proper manners and politeness. Parents had very little to do with parenting or spending time with their kids. This rejection compelled children to look for an escape from the world of adults. Kokko Ringkangmai says, "For a child reader, the glass world would spark its vivid imagination and allow him/her to escape from the adult world."

Parental neglect in Victorian society owed its beginnings to the ever rising capitalism in the 19th century. The railway journey that Alice goes through is a reflection of the same where a chorus of voices echo "time is worth a thousand pounds...smoke is worth a thousand pounds...language is worth a thousand pounds."(Carroll, 2018, p-26) . It shows the extremely materialistic attitude of Victorians. It was the time of industrialization. Everyone's focus was money. As a result of which parents didn't have time for children. They felt disconnected with society around them and also with themselves. Industrialization boosted England's Economy but at the cost of love and togetherness which led to wide social disparities. Life in Victorian society became very busy and soft emotions of love and compassion evaporated under the heat of the newly industrialized society. A sense of loneliness prevailed where everyone became part of a blind race. A view into Red Queen's comment "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else you must run at least twice as fast as that!" (Carroll, 2018, p-23), reflects the same fast forward lifestyle. The real satire is towards the end of the story where after reaching the destination of becoming a Queen, Alice is clueless about why she wanted to be there. It did not bring her any prosperity because she doesn't realise what she is supposed to do after being a Queen. "What am I to do?" exclaimed Alice, looking about in great perplexity..."

(Carroll, p.87). It is one of the best examples to illustrate as to why the race of looking for something better was futile. This chase of something better left no peace and solace in lives ultimately resulting in the loss of family values, love for children and significance of quality time.

Another point that Carroll raises in his work is that of morals and ethics. He mocks the inadequacy of the so-called social norms which were so strictly inculcated in a child's attitude that they became almost natural to him/her. This is visible in Alice's meeting with Tweedledum and Tweedledee where she faces the dilemma of shaking hands. She couldn't decide whom to shake hands with first, afraid of hurting the other one's feelings, and ended up shaking hands with both of them together. Next incidence that shows her attempt to uphold moral ethics is when she runs fast along with the Queen. "Have a biscuit?" / Alice thought it would not be civil to say, 'No,' though it wasn't at all what she wanted. So she took it, and ate it as well as she could: and it was very dry; and she thought she had never been so nearly choked in all her life." (Carroll, p.23). A nother incident where her morals become an obstacle is while dining with the Red Queen where she unfortunately gets deprived of the dinner as a reward for her ethics.

One more such example displaying Alice's politeness and ethical behaviour is when she mistakingly calls Humpty Dumpty's shape like an egg. This statement felt as provocation to Humpty Dumpty and in order to abide by the code of conduct and ethical values she alters her statement "'I said you looked like an egg, Sir,' Alice gently explained. 'And some eggs are very pretty, you know,' she added, hoping to turn her remark into a sort of compliment." (Carroll, p.53) This statement is nothing but her attempt to mend what she had spoiled. Later on she unwillingly becomes the audience of Humpty Dumpty and hears his nice long poem just to make sure that he is not offended with her straight forward refusal to hear him. These incidents mock the high mannerisms and social ethics preached to kids in Victorian society. "Not only is Alice frequently placed in the Dilemma of having to find an objective justification, for her conduct.....she often suffers the consequences of blind adherence to what in Victorian society would be good manners". (Matthews, 1970, p-116)

Furthermore, Carroll attempts to mock the power structures and exhibits a need to break free from suppressive norms. At the dining table, where candles fly, bottles join a couple of plates and create a complete mayhem, Alice gets baffled with all the chaos. Finally she breaks the spell of the dominating and oppressing authority figure, the Red Queen. "She took her off the table... and shook her backwards and forwards with all her might"(Carroll, 2018, p-94), forgetting all morals, values and freeing herself from all sorts of normatic restrictions. She shakes the queen vigorously until

she becomes a harmless kitten. “The Red Queen is the principal authority figure in the book. She stands for not just the concentrated essence the concentrated of all governesses, but for the essence of all figures of power in Victorian England that Carroll wishes to satirise.” Therefore the transformation of the Red Queen into meek kitty as a result of Alice’s vigorous stir is a realisation of the power of common citizens. Lim writes, “If rigid social structure, taken to an extreme, people into specific power relations then stepping out of that circle to challenge harmful authority helps restore order.

Only when Alice actively confronts the red Queen, can she free herself from the chaos of looking-glass.” (Lim, 1995) The Red Queen It can thus be deduced that with the help of Through the Looking-Glass, Carroll endeavours to emphasize the overlooking of cultural, religious and aesthetic values in England due to rampant mechanisation of humans. “Soon, it seemed, England would be merely a free-floating political aggregate held together by nothing more glorious than money or self interest, devoid of its once-cherished cultural and spiritual landmarks—a godless place not unlike the backwards world Alice discovers just behind the comforting bourgeois looking-glass”. (Rackin, 1991). The aforementioned instances discussed in the essay , especially the frantic railway scene, are nothing but a short of a testimony to the mechanisation and commoditization that was altering Victorian lives like never before. Carroll crafts his masterpiece by critically acknowledging all the contemporary ills of the time and presents their absurdity through satire, decipherable only to the critical eye.

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