Alice

Speaking of Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf said "since childhood remained in him entire, he could do what noone else has ever been able to do — he could return to that world; he could recreate it, so that we too become children again;" and Alice, the heroine of Carroll's Through the Looking Glass manifests this fascinating world of childhood with its bounteous joy and imagination.

Carroll presents Alice as a child not yet eight years old. She has been raised in a well-to-do victorian household, and her general demeanour and good manners even with her pets reveal her genteel upbringing. She treats others with kindness and courtesy, and expect the same of others as evidenced in her various interactions with the looking glass creatures of her dreams. The story has it that on a sombre winter evening, Alice falls asleep while playing with her kittens, and in her dreams, she travels into the looking glass world beyond the mirror on the mantlepiece. As is suggestive of the mirror framework, the looking glass world is an inversion of the real world and everything here happens in the reverse — here chess pieces come to be alive playing out their anointed course in a large game of chess, and events seem to run backwards. Alice here comes across fantastical characters — speaking flowers and insects, and even meets some

of the nursery rhyme characters which Alice might have recently learnt — Tweedledee, Tweedledum, the battling lion and the Unicorn, and Humpty Dumpty.

Although young, Alice is fairly intelligent and seeks logic and order in the world around her. Just as she chides Kitty for her lack of discipline and order, Alice fights hard to understand the fantastic dream world that has sprung from her own imagination, trying her best to order her life experiences and connect them to the unusual situations she encounters in the Looking Glass world. Carroll catches Alice perhaps in a phase where children try to figure out the meanings of the seemingly unintelligible adult words and situations with their limited comprehensive abilities. Infact the entire book makes it a point that Alice is in the process of learning not only the adult language — the gap between the words and the things they mean — but also the aberrations in adult thoughts and actions. The clutter and chaos in the looking glass world might very well reflect Alice's own confusion in comprehending the adult world, and the fact that she has to traverse this world is symbolic of her own journey into womanhood. In England during Carroll's time, twelve (12) was considered the age of consent for women and when Carroll wrote Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland, Alice Liddell on whom these stories are based, was about ten years old. Through the Looking Glass was

written and published much later when Alice Liddell was about nineteen years old, and although Liddell was no more a child, he recreates her lost innocence and the magical world of childhood in general. Carroll's longing for lost innocence is reflected in the poems that open and close the novel. In them he speaks of "happy summer glory", mentioning that Alice "still ... haunts me, phantomwise."

That the entire discourse of Through the Looking Glass is symbolic of Alice's journey into womanhood is evident in the metaphor of the game of chess underlying the novel. The looking glass world resembles a giant chessboard:

"It's a great huge game of chess that's being played - all over the world - if this is the world at all .... I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join - though ofcourse I should like to be a Queen best"

In the game plan, Alice is a white pawn on a giant chessboard of life in which the rows of the board are separated by brooks and the columns by hedges - the obvious obstacles to attaining maturity - which Alice must overcome and advance to the eighth square where she would be a Queen herself. Alice's wanderings in the looking glass world strictly corresponds to the moves of a white pawn on a chessboard and once on the opposite edge, she becomes

a Queen herself. Alice now seems better equipped to control the situations around her; she grabs the Red Queen, and as a result, checkmates the Red Queen King who has slept throughout the game. Carroll here conceived of the chess game as a learning experience for a child who was to "be" a pawn warring against the adults until he becomes one himself. On another symbolic plane, Alice might be taken as 'everyman' and chess as 'life' so that the entire game becomes a picture of man's struggle for life and excellence. In such a framework, the rudeness of the flowers and the other characters highlights the loneliness and alienation of this particular kind of journey. Some scholars have conjectured that the Red Queen and the speaking flowers might be anagrams for the matronly governesses dominating Victorian households, while the truly sympathetic White Knight might be taken as a double of Carroll himself — the 'honorary' Uncle and sacred knight of the little Alice Liddell.

Although a child in the story, Alice has often been viewed as representative of Victorian values. The initial impulsiveness with which Alice goes through the glass over the mantel and into the looking glass world is gradually tempered through experiences, and Alice comes to exhibit mature characteristics. Alice exemplifies this

determinism when she changes her mind from seeing the bee-like elephants in favour of moving along the course laid out by the Red Queen. This moment of self restraint is atypical of the insatiably curious Alice but her good sense prevails, and she moves directly from one square to another without going astray. Alice's resolve to complete the game demonstrates her growing determinism and her conscious ~~ad~~ avoidance of rash impulses. The Victorian era has a reputation for 'restraint' and 'propriety' in both speech and actions. Alice, too, rarely speaks nonsense and rarely enjoys it when spoken to her. In fact, her speech and manners are as proper as those of any Victorian heroine.

Carroll's novel also brings up the question of identity. The text seems to question who Alice really is. The looking glass world is perceived as a figment of Alice's dream but in the Tweedle dee - Tweedledum episode, Alice is spoken of as existing only in the Red king's dream. Alice seems to exist on several planes all at once; on the physical level, Alice is Alice Liddel, on the literary level, Alice represents the general innocence and imagination of childhood in general, but on the philosophical plane, Alice exists only as an idea. Carroll here touches

upon Plato's concept of mimetic representations. Since the looking glass world is a mimetic representation of the real world, it is twice removed from the ideal world, and hence in the looking glass world, Alice is virtually non existant. The fact that Alice might not really exist is also consistent with Berkeley's proposition that all things including the world exist only as ideas in the human mind. The final poem describes Alice "moving under skies / Never seen by waken eyes," and asks the readers — "Life, what is it but a dream"

- Alice thus holds the key to graver questions about life, reality and self-identity that permeate the novel. Even greater is the suggestion that the story is inevitably the author's dream. Like the pieced in the chessboard pottering under the will of the players, Alice is a 'pawn' in the hands of the auther.

To conclude, Alice, the character in Through the Looking Glass is a tribute to Carroll's inspiration Alice Liddell, and more generally, to the imagination and innocence of children but at the same time, she has in her, the elements of mature interest in that she comes to symbolise every man's journey towards maturity and discovery of the self. She remains the most loved and most studied child protagonist of all times.