

The Political Game in *Alice Books*: Carroll's Satirical Vision of the Age

Asst. Prof. Ansam Yarub Khyoon

Inst. Mayada Zuhair Al-Khafaji

Baghdad University

Physical Education College-Jadiriya

After the success of his party in the last electoral campaign 1998, Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of England commented saying:

‘We All Won!’

Just like in Alice in the Wonderland:

(The Independent)¹

Abstract

In 1865, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, British Nonsense writer and mathematician, presented *Alice in the Wonderland* using Lewis Carroll as a penname. The story was classified as children fiction leaving all its embedded political symbols and bitter satire of the royals, army, parties and parliaments up to guessing and concluding till the real identity of the writer was revealed and the second part of the story *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* released in 1871. In these stories, Carroll satirically portrayed Britain as a wonderland for its political and social nonsenses describing the ruling system as a game. The queen, the king, the army, and the governors were depicted as playing cards and pawns of chess; each has his own role in this game and part of a larger scheme rules and laws. Politicians and parliaments, out of the new Darwinian vision, were no more than prestigious and high eloquent animals. Alice was a symbol of oppressed British citizen looking for an end for the political tunnel she fell in; all the resolutions and constitutional reforms did not fit her dreams or ambitions. This series became a political allegory that could be applied to the political discourse and critique in Media, journalism, literature and electoral campaigns every time and then; ‘fighting over the large piece of cake’

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'off with their heads' and 'we all won' are still used. This study interested in shedding the light on political satire and the way Carroll applied it to express his attitude against the social and political flows at his time throughout the cartoonish characters, games and other symbols he portrayed.

Introduction

Britain at time of Alice has been identified as time of *Culture and Anarchy* as Mathew Arnold put it. Soon after the Queen Victoria claimed to the throne (1837-1901), rapid economic and social changes happened that made England the leading industrial power with an empire that occupied more than a quarter of the earth and population to be the empire where the sun never sets. Positively, such rapid developments enhanced kind of nationalist pride and optimistic view about future progress to grow. Yet, at the same time it allowed problems to accumulate such as social stresses, class conflicts, and pessimistic view about the ability of the British to cope, socially, politically, and psychologically with the age.

It was an age of exploiting steam power technology versus unregulated industrialization, great wealth for an expanding middle class versus massive poverty in slum neighborhoods and fast growing of urbanization versus depressed deterioration of rural England.²

Movements and theories like Darwinism referring to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution (*On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859) together with "positivism"³, a theory of natural science and logic contributed to sectarian controversy and religious doubt against an extreme reversion to strict biblical "fundamentalism".⁴ Materialism⁵ associated with Karl Marx's "Materialist Conception of History" was another challenge to orthodox belief. The Marxian influence on the London Office of the Communist League resulted in writing *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1849 that emphasized the struggle between the working class and the bourgeois at that time.⁶ Feminism,⁷ on the other hand, contributed to the social and political unrest in reference to "the Women Question"⁸ of equality in educational, political, legal and economic status and rights.

Others like "Utilitarianism"⁹ embodied by Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of great happiness for great number of people. Utilitarians' or Philosophic Radicals' reforms made changes not merely in the British political life but British economic and social life. Private education¹⁸³² (replaced by the public Education Act in 1870,) New Poor Law 1834, the repeal of Corn Laws and Free Trade in 1864 were among the prominent reforms that stirred the public opinion.¹⁰

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However, a growing social consciousness among Victorians paved the way to many social reforms. The "Factory Acts"¹¹ to limit children laboring and working day were sponsored by the Earl of Shaftesbury. Efforts to improve housing reforms credited to Octavia Hill. Associations like the Salvation Army to feed and house London's poor organized by William Booth.¹²The Public Health Act of 1848 was indebted to Edwin Chadwick who wrote *A Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population*, published in 1842. The Act created a Central Board of Health to improve the sanitary conditions, supervise street cleaning and waste removal and offer safe supply of water in a way to eliminate the epidemic of cholera that severely hit the working-class communities from time to time (1831,1848,1853 and1866).¹³

Politically, the pressure for reform put the country on turmoil, continuous striking and demonstrations calling for fair and justice. Issues like people representation, elections, the franchise or the right to vote: who could vote? A man lived in a shire or in a borough? and the distribution of seats, in other words, democratizing parliamentary representation was the dominant problem of the age. Wilson in *English Literature* referred to men like William Cobbett who earlier called for parliamentary reforms as increasing people representation as well as reducing corruption and cynicism of politics which all had been achieved in the first Reform Bill in 1832 taking by that the first step toward the modern democracy in England.¹⁴Crane Brinton in *Modern Civilization* and Maria Frawley in *English Literature in Context* referred to the role of Chartism¹⁵ in supporting the petition of People's Charter as an attempt to establish the foundation of political democracy in the parliament. The Chartists focused on six issues: annual elected Parliaments; universal manhood suffrage; secret ballots; equal electoral districts; abolition of property requirements for Members of Parliament (MP)and salaries for (MP).Though the demands were rejected twice by the House of Common in 1839 and 1848, many of them were approved on throughout the century.¹⁶

The Parliament produced strong prime ministers who dealt with different issues and events such as the Irish Potato Famine 1845 and the Crimean War with Russia 1854.Rivals Disraeli and Gladstone leading the Conservative (Tories) and the Liberals (Whigs)parties were the most prominent prime ministers (the lion and the unicorn in *Alice in Wonderland*) ; their heated parliamentary exchange raised the conflict between the two parties till now.¹⁷

Literary Trends

For all its conflicts and anxieties, the Victorian age witnessed self-critical and intellectual literary activities. Rees, in *Britain 1815-1851*, referred to the powerful role of press in challenging, supporting and leading public opinion. Newspapers like the *Times* and the *Examiner* supported the idea that parliamentary reform was the great issue of the moment; the *Globe* used to debate the electoral system in Britain whilst the *Morning Chronicle* focused on discussing the distribution of seats and the franchise. Editors in Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield reported all the parliamentary speeches and debates and commented on them; their comments reflected and directed the pressure for reform. While men such as Edward Baines in the *Leeds Mercury*, Thomas and James Thompson in the *Leicester Chronicle* and Charles and Richard Sutton in the *Nottingham Review*, all agitated against the unfair system of representation, others such as John Edward Taylor in the *Manchester Guardian*, Archibald Prentice in the *Manchester Times*, John Foster in the *Leeds Patriot* and Jonathan Crowther in the *Birmingham Journal*, all supported parliamentary reforms of some kind. Their links with the political unions justified their powerful impact upon public opinion and their directions.¹⁸

Beverly Ann Chin pointed out the important role of *Punch* Magazine; founded by Henry Mayhew and Ebenezer Landells in 1841. The *Punch* or the *London Charivari* was a British weekly magazine of humor and satire;¹⁹ most influential in 1840s and 50s. Its satiric commentaries, clever drawings and cartoons illustrated by such famous political cartoonists as George Cruikshank, George du Maurier, William Newman and Sir John Tenniel (Who also illustrated *Alice in Wonderland*) emphasized social and political consciousness and guided the pressure for reform. Notable authors who contributed at one time or another included Kingsley Amis, William Makepeace Thackeray, Sir Henry Lucy, Sylvia Plath, Penelope Fitzgerald and others.²⁰

Social-problem and "Condition of England"²¹ novels as Maria Frawley put it played more sophisticated role in Victorians' life. Novelists combined realistic social criticism with comedy and romantic sentiment to reflect their satiric vision to the socio-economic problems forcing by that the public opinion to find the right solution. New topics concerning the industrial revolution, harsh life, unfair laws and the need to social reforms depicted literary works at that time. In his masterpiece *Sybil or The Two Nations*, Benjamin Disraeli, a Tory Member of Parliament and the Prime Minister later, criticized "The Condition of the

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People”²² dividing Britain into two nations “the Rich and the Poor” or in other words the Conservative and the Democratic. His vision of great British Empire became true. Charles Dickens with his sense of humor and almost caricature characters attacked the utilitarians in *Oliver Twist* and *Hard Times*. Dickens’ *David Copperfield* sharply portrayed social abuses of all kinds and helped in achieving reforms in prisons and schools. William Makepeace Thackeray, a satirist and humorous writer in *Punch*, made fun of the upper- class pretended manner in works like *The Book of Snobs*. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray cleverly satirized the concept of “gentlemen”²³ and officers at the time of Waterloo. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton and Ruth* concerned with the working-class abused by the work owners “capitalists”²⁴ and called for social reforms. Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locker and Yeast* and *The Water Babies* associated critique of child labour with themes of evolution and moral education. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* as well as Anne Bronte’s *Agnes Grey* exposed the condition of governess to criticize the political, economic and social conditions that restricted women. Their heroines struggled with the educational and occupational limitations imposed on women at that time.

A way from realism, Lewis Carroll explored the world of dream-like fantasy to project his political satire vision on reality. ²⁵ In *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), the target stories of this research, Carroll presented new type of political satire using symbolic logic and nonsense in a game- like argument.

Lewis Carroll and Political Satire

Lewis Carroll, pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898), known as a mathematician, a logician, a clergyman and a member of the Governing Board of Christ Church to the end of his life. Critics like Martin Gardner regarded him as a Tory who was politically, religiously and personally conservative.

Francine F. Abele in her book *The political pamphlets and letters of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson*, revealed Dodgson’s deep concern in the important political issues of his day: the extension of the voting franchise, the fair redistribution of seats in the House of Commons, and methods of achieving proportional representation in the House. These issues applied to Ireland as well, especially relating to the concern over Ireland additional seats in the House. Dodgson's pamphlets and related letters of this period reflected his interests in ensuring minority representation and just outcomes in elections, eliminating, chance events and outside influences from the voting process.²⁶

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Between 1871 and 1885, he wrote a series of pamphlets that he distributed to the directors of his college and university, to members of Parliament, and he also wrote letters to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *St. James Gazette*. His mathematical skills to promote fairness in political procedures and in the process contributed much to two fields: game theory and political science. In *A Method of Taking Votes*, Dodgson recommended a method of choosing a winner that permitted voters to change their votes when cycles were present in order to produce a consensus ranking based on inversion. This method developed into the coalition strategies he advocated for distributing seats to candidates in an ordered list in *The Principles of Parliamentary Representation* (item 30), which Duncan Black (1908-1991), the Scottish economist and political theorist, described as "the most interesting contribution to Political Science that has ever been made."²⁷

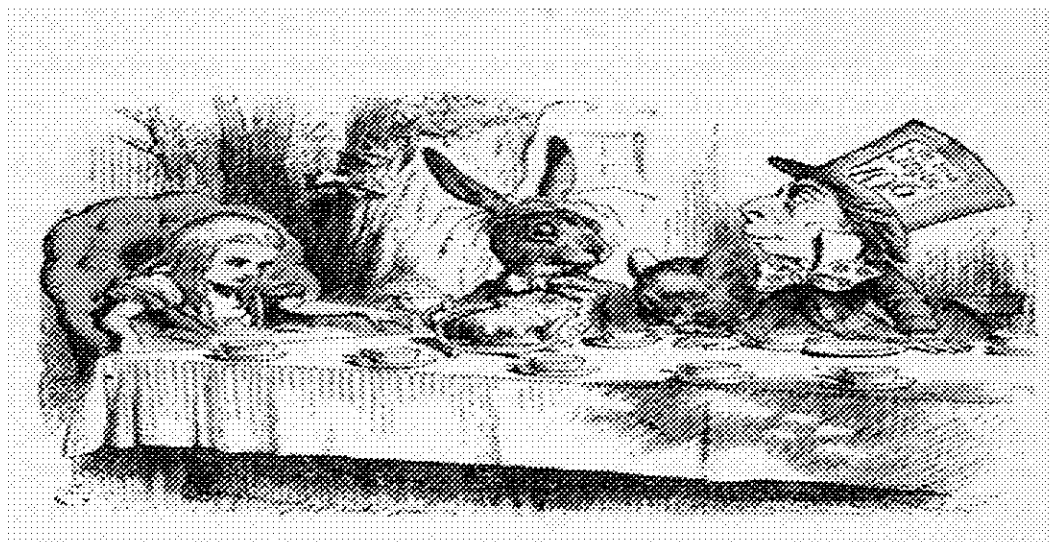
In 1865, Dodgson published the first book of *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* under penname Lewis Carroll. Later in 1871, he released a sequel, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* which included the famous poem "Jabberwocky. The Alice books became classics within few years of their publication while remained popular with their songs and poems among children since Victorian time till today. In these books, Carroll invented dream-like fantasy in which he satirically portrayed Britain as a wonderland, everything in it was upside-down and queer; characters, words and behavior. The animated card Queen and soldiers, the animals in the caucus race as well as the chess Queens and paws or the rival lion and unicorn were all part of the political game.²⁸ The game-like argument in Alice books relied on linguistic play and nonsense by which Carroll tried to make logic reasoning out of arbitrary behavior and meaningless words reflecting to political debates at his age.²⁹

Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, classified Carroll's *Books* about *Alice in Wonderland* as "perfect **Menippean satire**" for their philosophical "extended dialogues and debates often conducted at banquet or party (e.g. the tea party) in which a group of loquacious eccentrics, pedants, literary people, and representatives of various professions or philosophical points of view serve to mistake ludicrous the attitudes and viewpoints they typify by the arguments they urge in their support."³⁰

With Sir John Tenniel's illustrations, the famous English satirical artist and political caricaturist,³¹ Carroll took the argument of logic and nonsense to its high level in Alice books. In the opening scene of *Alice in Wonderland*, Carroll made his point "what is the use of a book ... without

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pictures or conversations?"³² Tenniel's drawings for both books placed them among the most famous literary illustrations ever made. They became even very compatible to Lewis Carroll's text.



A Mad Tea-party illustrated by Sir John Tenniel.³³

More precisely, Maria Frawley, in *English Literature in Context*, classified *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* as political satire for their witty references to the royalty represented by the ill-tempered red Queen and to the well-known animosity between Disraeli and Goldstone through the characters of the Unicorn and lion.³⁴

Political References in Alice Books

There were four major political games in Alice's Books, The Caucus Race, Croquet, Cards and Chess each game required different characteristics, the Caucus Race and Croquet require physical skills, and cards depended on luck and fortune while chess required share intellectual skills.³⁵

1. The Caucus Race :

After falling into wonderland, Alice went through many experiences one of them is swimming in her own pool of tears along with many animals and birds. They were all washed out to the bank "all dripping wet, cross, and uncomfortable."³⁶ In order to get dry, some of the "queer – looking party"³⁷ made plenty of suggestions on how to get dry yet they all followed the Dodo's suggestion which is a Caucus – Race. The race was a strange game for all of them that Alice had to ask "What is a Caucus – Race?"³⁸ The Dodo explained the race saying that the best way to explain it is by doing it :

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First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, ('the exact shape doesn't matter,' it said,) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no 'One, two, three, and away,' but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out 'The race is over!' and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking, 'But who has won?'

This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him), while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said, '*everybody* has won, and all must have prizes.' (Carroll, p23)

At first glance the race looked like an incident from Carroll's dairy where Alice Liddell and her group; Duck (Reverend Robinson Duckworth), Dodo (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), Lorina (the Lory) and Edith (Eaglet) were caught in rain during a boat trip.³⁹ It was during such trips that Dodgson wrote the Alice books.

Yet Reading between the lines would show Carroll's political allegory of elections which was a passion of his during that time. The term Caucus itself referred to "a meeting of the member or leaders of a political party to choose candidates or to decide policy."⁴⁰ Or it meant "a group of people with similar interests, often within a larger organization or political party."⁴¹ Dodgson was very much involved in politics in general. He wrote about committees, elections and proportionate representations⁴² yet he was much interested in the electoral system in particular. He published many articles about it and wanted to write a book about it so distributed his political pamphlets concerning elections with blank pages to his friends so as to provide him with criticism and suggestions.⁴³ Finally Dodgson managed to publish only a manuscript on elections.⁴⁴

The Dodo was a comic figure of Dodgson himself who had a stutter and pronounced his last name as Dodo – Dodgson. Dodgson called for a political meeting though his Caucus – Race to author some rules about elections.⁴⁵ In this imaginative game of drying out in Wonderland Dodgson provided us with a "charming and prescient description of a political process that was not invented in the 'real' world for another hundred years."⁴⁶ He started by stating that the nominating process should be ran on a course that is a "sort of a circle"⁴⁷ yet its exact "shape does not matter."⁴⁸ The candidates in Alice's party started their election race here and there without having numbers or even waiting for the starting single,