

# What Makes *Alice in Wonderland* a Classic When Other Books Have Faded?

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), more commonly known as *Alice in Wonderland*, is one of the most beloved novels in children's literature. Its success is evident in the countless adaptations, retellings, and artistic interpretations that continue to be seen today in fashion, design and film. For example, The V&A Museum held an exhibition in 2021 *Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser* showcasing many different adaptations. Yet, why has *Alice in Wonderland* achieved such timeless appeal when many other children's books have not lasted?

In this critical review, I will explore the factors that have contributed to the novel's lasting success, such as its imaginative world, complex characters, and the cultural context in which it was written. I will also compare how *Alice in Wonderland* has influenced my artistic practice with the work of two other artists who have reinterpreted Carroll's story, Tim Burton and John Tenniel. Furthermore, I will examine how Graham Rawle's visual storytelling in his reinterpretation of *The Wizard of Oz* informs his creative practice, and how this has influenced my approach.

Through this investigation, I aim to discover how Carroll's story continues to influence contemporary creative work and reflect on how these influences have shaped my understanding and artistic development.

## **Imagination World**

One of the most striking features of *Alice in Wonderland* is its imaginative and bizarre world, where logic does not exist and ordinary rules of reality no longer apply. There are many examples of this such as the scene of the Mad Hatter's tea party, where time itself has stopped. When the Hatter asks Alice the date and hears her answer, he exclaims that his watch is "two days wrong!" (Carroll, L. 1982).

Another example of this is shown in the chapter Pool of Tears. In this chapter, Alice keeps growing and gets upset causing her to cry. However, when she shrinks back she realises she is swimming in her pool of tears alongside various other animals. Carroll's clever language encourages readers, especially children, to escape into a world where the impossible becomes possible. Authors who use this imaginative quality in their writing are successful. This is evident in the likes of books such as the *Harry Potter* genre, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *The Secret Garden*. However,

*Alice in Wonderland* stands out from other stories because it uses pure nonsense, a world where everything is unusual and different. Additionally, characters such as The Queen of Hearts shouting, "Off with their heads!" (Carroll, L. 1982) for the smallest offences, or the Cheshire Cat's sudden appearances and disappearances, create an unpredictable and interesting narrative that holds the reader's attention in a way few stories have managed.

Many complex ideas are hidden within Carroll's writing, exploring and questioning society's structure, logic, and authority. For example, Carroll "seems to revel in the arbitrary and illogical nature of authority figures" (Gardner, 1960), reflecting how society's rules can often seem nonsensical to a child. The absurd nature of the novel allows children to explore these ideas entertainingly, and as Carroll himself wrote, "Everything's got a moral if only you can find it" (Carroll, L. 1982).

In my artistic practice, Carroll's emphasis on imagination has inspired me to break free from traditional artistic methods such as painting or drawing. Instead, whilst working on my illustrations I blended handmade sculptures with painted backdrops, and then digitally enhanced the illustrations creating a layered and multidimensional style, whilst also learning how to create an animation using the software Blender (Fig.1) and (Fig.3). Inspiration from Carroll's work has encouraged me to experiment with different mediums such as wire, plasticine, crochet and clay (Fig.2) and embrace the unexpected.



Fig.1 *Alice falling down the rabbit hole* (2024)



Fig.2 *White Rabbit* (2024)



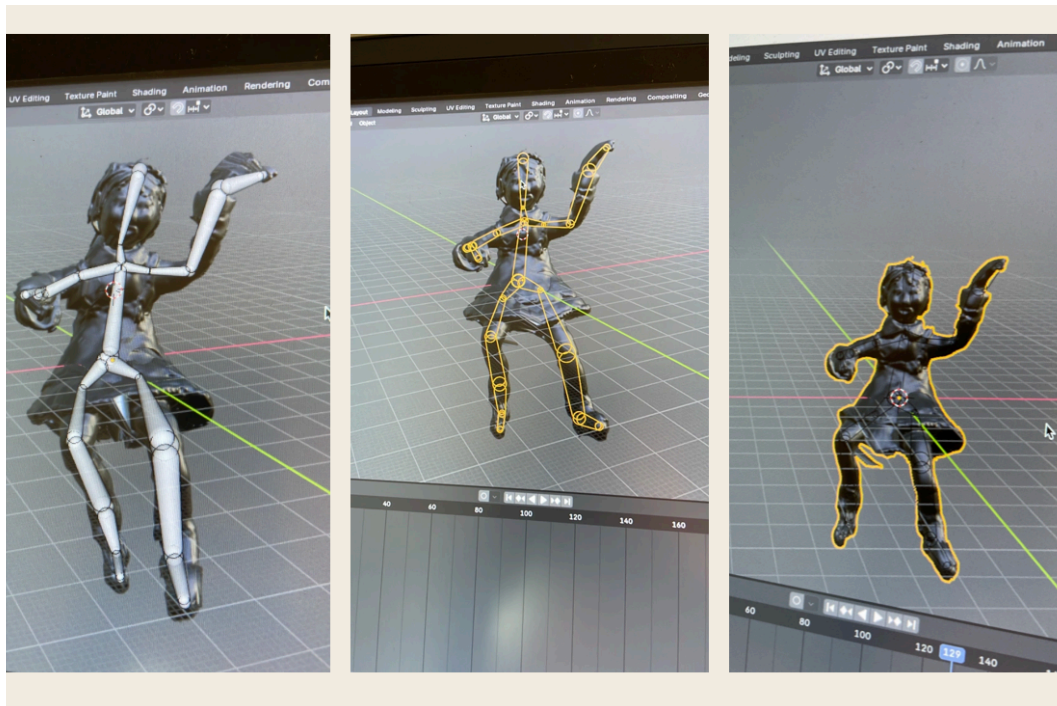


Fig. 3 Alice falling in Blender (2024)

### **Complex characters**

Another reason for the book's success is its complex characters, each with unique personalities that convey deeper, symbolic meanings. For instance, the Queen of Heart's irrational and violent personality serves as a warning about the misuse of authority. This theme echoes throughout history, from figures like Hitler to modern conflicts such as the war between Ukraine and Russia, where abuse of power leads to devastation. Carroll's portrayal of the Queen invites readers to reflect on the dangers of ruling through fear and the need to challenge unjust authority.

Then there is Alice, the main character, a curious young girl who navigates Wonderland by questioning the absurdities around her and challenging them with logic. For example, when faced with the Queen of Hearts, Alice boldly says, "They're only a pack of cards!" (Carroll, L. 1982, Chapter 12). This shows her growing confidence in questioning authority. Scholars argue that Alice's constant questioning of Wonderland's bizarre logic reflects how children try to make sense of the world around them, representing the process of growing up and developing critical thinking. ((Everything, 2023) ) The use of these complex characters not only makes the story more thought-provoking but also entertaining. This has made me realise the importance of great character design.

## The cultural context

I visited Oxford to explore the elements that influenced Lewis Carroll's story. It was enlightening to see the small garden door in the cathedral grounds (Fig.6), where Alice Liddell once played, and to discover the engraved face of the Cheshire Cat high up on the cathedral ceiling (Fig.4). The two brass andirons, shaped like ladies with elongated necks (Fig.5), instantly brought to mind the surreal transformations in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Experiencing these features as Carroll might have inspired me to create my interpretation of Alice.



Fig. 4 *Cheshire Cat engraving*  
(n.d)



Fig. 5 *Brass Andirons* (n.d)



Fig. 6 *Garden Door* (n.d)

Walking through these spaces gave me the feeling of stepping into Carroll's and Alice's worlds. These moments of connection with the physical settings that inspired Wonderland sparked my imagination and gave me a new perspective on how I approach my illustrations.

'*The Story of Alice*' by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and '*The Annotated Alice*' by Martin Gardner and The Invention of Childhood. London: BBC Digital deepened my understanding of the complex cultural context in which the novel was written. It has given me a better understanding of the Victorian era. Life was very different from what we experience today. For wealthy families, children were often raised in strict environments, with clear expectations to uphold moral values. Children were typically cared for by hired nannies in large households, while their parents maintained a certain social distance. Literature for children during this period often focused on moral lessons and enforced discipline.

However, Carroll's novel offered something new to this norm. Children could enter a new world where these strict rules of Victorian society no longer apply. Instead of moral lessons, the story transforms the reader into a world of freedom, imagination, and independence. In Wonderland, Alice questions authority, challenges strange characters, and explores her surroundings. The complete opposite of the Victorian upbringing. In a time of such sadness and constraints, this novel allowed children to escape into a world where they could think for themselves and ignore the rules. This element is another contributing factor to the book's success.

### **The Influence of Other Artists**

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has inspired countless artists over the years. The V&A Museum held an exhibition in 2021 *Alice: Curiouser and Curiouser*. This exhibition showed how Lewis Carroll's story has inspired visual culture, fashion, film, and contemporary art for over 150 years. It showcased a range of works by artists, designers, and filmmakers, all of which had either reimagined or drawn inspiration from the story. It featured surrealist interpretations and whimsical creations. It was interesting to look at some of the work featured in the video documentary and to see Carroll is still sparking creativity in modern culture.

### **Ralph Steadman**

Ralph Steadman reinterpreted scenes from the novel in an expressive style (Fig.7).



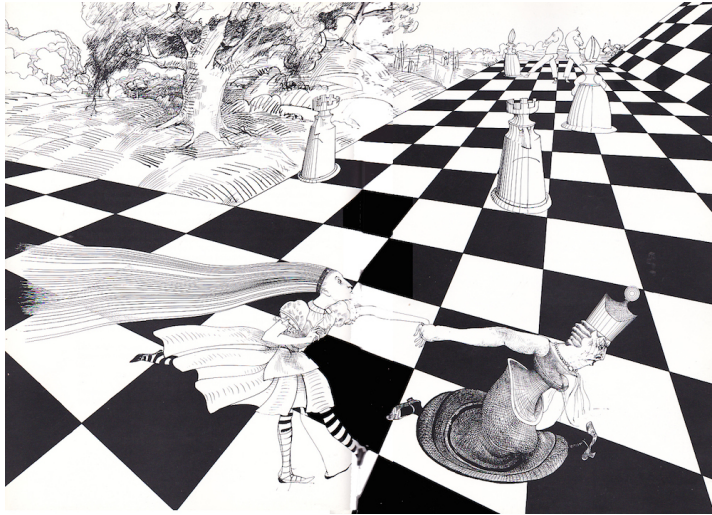


Fig. 7 *Ralph Steadman Alice in Wonderland* (1967)

His particular attention to detail and distorted or exaggerated perspectives in his illustrations resonate with me, as I have similarly tried to incorporate a sense of perspective and detail in my art. His work perfectly complements the surreal nature of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Another artist who has reinterpreted scenes from the novel is Tim Burton, in his dark and whimsical 2010 film *Alice in Wonderland*. Burton brought the story to life through his distinctive visual direction, creating Wonderland with a gothic atmosphere that contrasts the more whimsical, illustrations of past artists. His interpretation has captured the dream-like quality of Carroll's world while emphasising its absurdity.



Fig. 8 *Tim Burton Alice in Wonderland* (2010)

What I found most interesting about the film is how he retained the symbolic nature of each character, keeping their deeper meanings. For example, characters like the Cheshire Cat and Mad Hatter, while slightly scary and bizarre in appearance, still retain the original character's personality

from the book. “While it is not a scene for scene line by line version of the book it manages to capture the spirit of why Alice in Wonderland is still one of the most beloved and celebrated literature in the world”. (Alex, 2024)

Furthermore, Burton’s dedication to creating, animated films that feature hand-crafted clay sculptures in the likes of the films *Vincent* and *Corpse Bride*, motivates me to push my boundaries in developing a unique version of Wonderland much like I did with my sculpture of Humpty Dumpty with his exaggerated features and bold colours.



Fig. 9 *Humpty Dumpty* (2024)

Additionally, Burton’s use of stop-motion animation in films like *Vincent* and *Corpse Bride* has inspired me to further explore animation in Blender, allowing me to bring my sculptures to life. This use of techniques will enable me to create narratives that resonate with the dream-like quality of Carroll’s work while adding my own artistic style.

**Graham Rawle**

Researching Graham Rawle's reinterpretation of *The Wizard of Oz* I discovered he painstakingly



Fig. 10 *The Wizard of Oz* (2008)

assembled numerous elements to craft a surreal interpretation of the story. By merging tactile handmade materials, he has created a work that is both imaginative and captivating.

His style has influenced my own work, inspiring me to blend hand-crafted elements with digital enhancements. By layering different materials and media. It was fascinating to learn that Rawle had been drawn to the narrative for many years before embarking on his reinterpretation and that he uncovered backstories for each character. This undoubtedly deepened his passion for the project much like my exploration of *Alice in Wonderland*.

### **John Tenniel**

Finally, John Tenniel's iconic illustrations must be acknowledged, as they formed the foundation for the original edition of *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*. In the novel's opening scene, Alice peeps into her sister's book and wonders, "And what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?" (Carroll, L 1982). Reflecting on this, I vividly remember reading the book with Tenniel's illustrations, spending hours imagining myself in the scenes as if I were a fly on the wall. Without Tenniel's illustrations, I believe the book wouldn't have achieved the same level of success. Carroll and Tenniel worked in harmony, their collaboration blending words and images to create an enchanting Wonderland.

Reflecting on the era in which it was created, it is interesting that Victorian children might have shared the same escapism I once did. Tenniel's illustrations likely gave them a sense of familiarity and strangeness, allowing them into Carroll's bizarre world. His detailed depictions of characters



like the Queen of Hearts and the Cheshire Cat have shaped how readers visualise Carroll's Wonderland for generations.

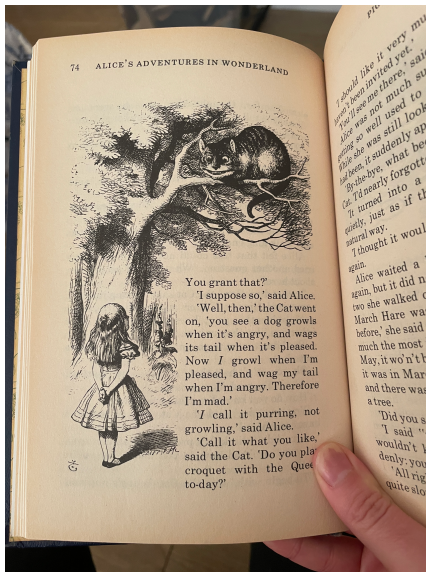


Fig. 11 *Cheshire Cat and Alice* (1982)



Fig. 12 *The Queen of Hearts* (1982)

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* remains a timeless classic due to its ability to be loved in the era it was written and continues to resonate with readers today. Lewis Carroll's imaginative world, filled with whimsy, nonsense, and the rejection of Victorian moral rigidity, offers a refreshing escape from the structured realities of its original time and modern life. The complex characters, serve as symbolic reflections of deeper societal issues, inviting readers to question authority, challenge societal norms, and explore alternative perspectives.

The freedom and independence that Alice experiences in Wonderland provided children of that era and continue to provide modern readers, with an opportunity to explore a world where logic, authority, and convention are turned upside down. Through my artistic practice and the work of artists like Tim Burton, John Tenniel, and Ralph Steadman, it is clear that Carroll's novel continues to inspire creativity and provoke thought in contemporary culture.

By examining the novel's lasting appeal, both through its imaginative storytelling and the context in which it was written, it becomes clear that *Alice in Wonderland* will continue to be a source of inspiration, and spark creativity in future generations of artists and readers alike.

# Illustration List

Fig.1 Fowler, G (2024) *Alice falling down the rabbit hole* [mixed media] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig.2 Fowler, G (2024) *White Rabbit* [mixed media] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 3 Fowler, G (2024) *Alice Falling in Blender* [Blender animation] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 4 Fowler, G (n.d) *Cheshire Cat engraving* [Photograph of engraving] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 5 Fowler, G (n.d) *Brass Andirons* [Photograph of Andirons] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 6 Fowler, G (n.d) *Garden Door* [Photograph of the door] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 7 Steadman, R (1967) *Alice in Wonderland* [Drawing] Available at: <https://www.ralphsteadman.com/collection/alice-in-wonderland/>

Fig. 8 Burton, T (2010) *Tim Burton Alice in Wonderland* [Google Screenshot] Available at: <https://dailybruin.com/2016/02/22/trailer-talk-alice-through-the-looking-glass>

Fig. 9 Fowler, G (2024) *Humpty Dumpty* [sculpture] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 10 Rawle, G (2008) *The Wizard of Oz* [photograph of book] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 11 Carroll. L (1982) *Cheshire Cat and Alice* [photograph of book] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

Fig. 12 Carroll. L (1982) *The Queen of Hearts* [photograph of book] In possession of the author: Gloucestershire.

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