

[Western and Eastern Fantasies: Possible Worlds and Isekai in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*]

Réka Kormos

University of Debrecen,
Debrecen, Hungary

[Abstract] *The study presents an analysis of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland regarding its possibilities considering the function of imagination, mainly drawing on the literature exploring possible world theories. Based on the assumption that a similar yet different world exists, Western and Eastern fantasies meet in one similar concept: isekai (Japanese, meaning 'different world' or 'otherworld'). Isekai is a Japanese subgenre which can also be interpreted alongside possible world theories, and this article aims to show differences and similarities by interpreting Carroll's work. It highlights the presence of alienation, fantasy, focusing on Alice's process of becoming familiar with the new world and on her struggle to understand the phenomena of Wonderland. Moving away from the novel towards isekai, special attention is paid to the position of the reader and the protagonist*

[Keywords] *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Lewis Carroll; isekai; fantasy; reader; Roland Barthes; possible world theories; alienation; imagination; children's literature*

[1] Introduction

There are many possibilities when writing about Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, which is why these novels are often referred to as philosophical goldmines. They are able to capture the attention of both adults and children. We readers often try to identify the purpose and the message of the stories and to come up with colourful and changing answers. This started to make me aware of the possible interpretations this tale offers. In Far Eastern culture, the core concept of Carroll's novels is a common one; a child falls into the unknown and receives help from magical or unusual beings. The concept is at the heart of many tales, but even so, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is one such tale that has captured many hearts, even in Japan.

Japanese traditions and culture are heavily influenced by the Western world, and this influence began after World War II when Japanese society's eyes started to drift towards Europe and the United States. Japanese people began to take pride in their culture and lifestyle, but at the same time, the Western lifestyle started to influence them and became alluring to follow. Japanese society began to change, becoming more open towards the West. Japanese art and the country's overall lifestyle, which was unique and different, started to be well-known in the West. During the 1980s and 1990s, the connection started to deepen among the younger generations, through a new form of art: Japanese animation and comics, also known as *anime* and *manga*. The Western desire to get to know these Japanese art forms is no longer particularly rare; indeed this interest has become strong, and some Westerners want to know even the most trivial details about Japanese culture. This desire has been seen before, in the 19th century, in the form of "Japonisme". This word, first used in the discussion of Japan's influence on France from 1854 to 1910, was coined in 1872 by the influential art critic Philippe Burty (Weisberg 120). The world-famous artist Vincent Van Gogh was also influenced by the movement, and viewers can discover Japanese motifs more or less hidden in his works. For example, in his painting *Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear* (1889) we can spot Mount Fuji and a geisha in the background. Even his themes (nature, workers and everyday life) are based on the work of the Japanese artist Hokusai, who mostly made woodblock prints addressing the same topics. Hokusai's pieces were among the first Japanese artworks to become available to a Western audience, but they were also made with this intention in mind; they were whitewashed, because Hokusai's main goal was to sell the prints through Dutch traders. The process of whitewashing was needed because he wanted to make sure his pieces were sold, and he sought to paint a more exotic picture of his country (Weisberg 122). Hokusai's job and life revolved around his art. He sold his art, so his works represented his livelihood. This is another reason why the Dutch traders were important; Hokusai saw the opportunity of a better life. He was able to make a living from his art, but after an accident caused by fire, his quality of life deteriorated and he tried to better his circumstances. The reason I mention Hokusai is that he was one of the fathers of manga art, his work was often based on myths and fantastic creatures, and his prints were the first that made Europeans inter-

ested in Japanese art. The effect of this trend was most widespread in visual art, though it was also represented in various other areas, such as gardening or performance art. Over time, this trend slowly moved towards Japanese pop culture, namely anime and fantasy, which took over the Western world once again.

This is where fantasy and isekai gained their opportunity to show off their strengths and possibilities. Readers do not necessarily need to have a similar cultural or social background; the works provide them with the information they need to analyse and find pleasure and joy in the stories, and that is precisely how they can reach a wider audience. This article tries to answer the question why *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* qualify to be a stepping stone, the starting point on a bridge that could connect Eastern and Western audiences. I focus mainly on the readers' responses, and I demonstrate the different interpretations and opportunities that Carroll's novels offer.

[2] The Theories of Wonderland

If we talk about analysing a book, in this case *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we should think about its genre. This work is mainly considered to be a piece of children's literature, and it is one of the most well-known fantasy books. As Bettelheim states in *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of Fairy Tales*:

Fantasy fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding which are due to the immaturity of his thinking and his lack of pertinent information. [...] The normal child begins his fantasizing with some more or less correct observed segment of reality, which may evoke such strong needs or anxieties in him that he gets carried away by them. Things often become so muddled in his mind that he is not able to sort them out at all. But some orderliness is necessary for the child to return to reality not weakened or defeated, but strengthened by this excursion into his fantasies. (61)

This quote leads us through all the concepts I mention here. First of all, fantasy; according to Rosemary Jackson, who draws on Todorov's definition, fantastic texts and fantasy can be described as follows:

[...] the purely fantastic text establishes absolute hesitation in the protagonist and reader: they can neither come to terms with the unfamiliar events described, nor dismiss them as supernatural phenomena. Anxiety, then, is not merely a thematic feature, but is incorporated into the *structure* of the work to become its defining element. Todorov insists that it is this systematic writing in, or *inscription*, of hesitation which defines the fantastic. (16)

Most of the scholarly literature about fantasy is based on Tzvetan Todorov's work from 1950, *Introduction to Fantastic Literature* (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1950), and both Jackson and Todorov state that good fantasy should show something that is nearly real and enhance the fantastic in it, making both the reader and characters hesitate

(Jackson 16). The world of fantasy only opens itself up to those who know the real world and its rules. In the case of children, their understanding is limited, and they are at a life stage where they are just starting to explore and learn about the world. This can cause anxiety, and children's fantasy novels can help children lift this pressure. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a perfect example. Alice is full of anxiety, and her concept of reality is relatively easy to bend. With her very limited knowledge, she falls into a new world. She has some ideas about social rules, but her knowledge and personality are fragile. Even so, she knows the importance of intelligence:

"I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think--" (for, you see, Alice had learnt several things of this *Alice's adventures in wonderland* sort in her lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over) "--yes, that's about the right distance--but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I've got to?" (Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.). (Carroll 7-8)

She wishes to speak and act like an adult, but she is not yet knowledgeable or experienced enough to do so. During the course of the novel, we see Alice as a pre-teen or teen. Her body is constantly changing, not only as a teen but also with the help of magical potions and sweets, and she also adjusts her opinions to fit what other people want to hear. However, this starts to change at the end of the first novel, when she begins to speak her mind and form solid arguments. At the beginning of the novel, however, at the time when she meets the Caterpillar, she realises she does not even know who she is.

After falling into Wonderland, her body immediately changes; she grows large, then becomes small again, showing a lack of permanence. As an adult, the rules and expectations placed on her are entirely different. She will forget about daydreams and childish fantasies and secure a place for herself in the world, a goal which she achieves during the trial at the end of the book. During the course of the novel, it is easy to see that this is much easier said than done, and if it is done by force, her mind could shatter. We can consider Wonderland a place where this transformation from childhood to adulthood can be made smoothly, without harm. This can also be said about fairy tales and other children's books too. Let us consider Peter Pan, where Neverland's golden boy has to face the need to grow up, or the tales about princes and princesses where marriage and love mark the beginning of adult life. Children's literature is a perfect tool to exhibit how different paths yield different outcomes. If you are good and can follow the good path, you shall receive your reward – that is, happiness – but if you act wrongly, you will be punished for your wrongdoings.

According to Bettelheim, Alice's fall into Wonderland takes on a new meaning. She finds herself in a fantastic tale and lives through the story as a child, but we cannot forget how dangerous this is. If she does not grow up, she will be stuck in Wonderland, and she

will lose herself. That is why the seed of self-acceptance is there, and her journey to find herself is crucial. If she is unable to distance herself from her childish ideas, her mind could shatter, and she could remain naive and ignorant of reality forever (Bettelheim 12–13).

Even so, the idea of falling into a fantasy world makes it much easier for children to fantasize about a journey similar to Alice's. This is one of the reasons why Alice is a perfect example of a fairytale heroine. She has a body that can perform miraculous deeds, she is easy to accept, and she becomes everything a child could wish for (Bettelheim 57). Let us recall the very beginning of the tale; how Alice immediately grows up or shrinks into a small child as needed, but becomes normal-sized when that is the most convenient. Also, seeing animals who can speak is not shocking for her. She stops, but she immediately accepts this fact and develops strong bonds, saves countries and time itself, meanwhile managing to find herself as a person and fix her concepts of important things. Despite this, she is avoiding becoming lost in the new world and remembering the original one; Wonderland forces her to do so. At one point she has the opportunity to take care of a baby who is considered to be a pig by its mother but is not initially seen as one by Alice. As Alice also starts to see the baby as a pig, the baby consequently starts to turn into one. Alice decides that motherhood is too strange, and she is not up to the task. Here the reader can see a new stage of age development; being a mother, who is ready to sacrifice herself for her children. Alice sees the responsibilities and duties of motherhood but realizes she is not ready for them.

A similar event occurs when she meets the pigeon. In this particular case, she is seen as a snake who tries to steal the eggs from the nest, appearing as a threat to the older women and mothers with her youth and desires. By the end of the first book, we have seen Alice in every life stage, and in every traditional role women usually play. The careless, helpless child, the awkward teen who has difficulty understanding the adult world, and Alice in the young adult stage, when she learns to put herself first and learns her boundaries. She can be seen as a woman who can be a threat to families, luring the father figure or the child away, yet she can also be a diligent worker who tries to push on and achieve her goals even if it means giving herself up. We see the stage when those who are dragging her down no longer matter, and lastly, with the help of her sister, the reader can see the picture of an elderly, complete Alice. The presentation of these images has its benefits for the children reading the novel. Separating life stages and showing how you can play various roles are a frequent feature of various tales, including *Little Red Riding Hood*. Here, we see the growing child, as well as the grandmother who is in the last stage of her life, and who accepts and adores the young. But the stage of the grown woman is missing. Her role can be seen as someone who sees her own child as a threat, who wants the child's position in life and is afraid of the process of aging; in this case, there is no acceptance.

Works of children's literature are written by adults, and are often written for both adults and children. Marah Gubar, paraphrasing Townsend, writes the following: "Regarding the term [children literature], they [scholars] point out that the possessive 'children's' falsely implies that young people own or control a body of texts that are generally

written, published, reviewed, and bought by adults, and often read by them as well” (Gubar 210). Everything is based on what the authors of the narratives think about children; they try to craft the tale to fit that image. The idea of a child is often simple and pure, yet despite this, children’s books are often full of sarcasm, sexuality, and concepts that are not necessarily understood by children (Gubar 211).

In a fictional, fantastic world, the logic we know from the real world loses its validity, yet when reading Carroll’s work, we try to understand Wonderland. We can see in the two novels that the concept of space and time in Wonderland is completely different from ours. We started with the concepts of fairy tales and fantasy, where strangeness meets concepts or situations that we are already familiar with. This can produce a sense of the “*uncanny*”. One of the first people who wrote about this sensation was Sigmund Freud, in 1919. Freud’s essay “The Uncanny”, also known under its original German title “Das Unheimlich”, locates the strangeness in the ordinary, which can be manifested in things, sensations, experiences, and situations (Freud 1). Rosemary Jackson writes the following, taking into account Freud as well as Kayser and Hélène Cixous’s critique of Freud’s essay:

It “only presents itself, initially, on the edge of something else. [...] for the uncanny is in effect *composite*, it infiltrates itself in between things, in the interstices, it asserts a *gap* where one would like to be assured of unity.” [...] the uncanny as a *mode of apprehending* links fantasy to grotesque art: “The grotesque is a structure... [...] it is the estranged world, our world which has been transformed’. The uncanny, however, removes structure. It empties the ‘real’ of its ‘meaning’ [...]”. (39)

Children are looking for something familiar yet at the same time unheard of in their storybooks; a great fantasy therefore has some similarities with reality, but at the same time includes some impossible things as well. The presence of both at the same time can cause the shivering sensation of the uncanny. The line between reality and delirium starts to fade, and the reader’s unconscious mind starts to panic and grasp for familiar concepts. Reality and fantasy try to unify, but time and characters are threatened with dissolution in fantastic texts, the ground rules are in danger, and indeterminacy becomes constant. “Classical unities of space, time and character are threatened with dissolution in fantastic texts. Perspective art and three-dimensionality no longer hold as ground rules: parameters of the field of vision tend towards indeterminacy [...]” (Jackson 27). At this point, the relationship between realism and familiarity is evident.

In the case of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, the role of the Cheshire Cat should be highlighted. He often upsets both the reader and Alice, only to bring the logical order back later on. His purpose is to show the concepts of Wonderland and to make the reader and Alice familiar with them. During this process, he makes us think about basic concepts, but due to his personality as a character, we start asking questions. For example, in the case of the character Nobody, we use a common word, but what if it becomes a name? And why do we have to be careful how we talk about him? Because of this name-related issue, this volume can be considered Nominalist. Nominalism is based on Plato, and it

can be described as the belief that name and form are the same. If you know the name, you will know the form, the purpose, and its existence. Roger W. Holmes writes the following on this:

Alice seems to be a Nominalist, suggesting that names are tags by which we can conveniently denote objects without having to point. But a few pages later she comes to the Wood-where-things-have-no-names and quickly discovers what the Medieval Realists knew: that names have a connotation as well as a denotation. (136)

During the encounter with Humpty-Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, the difference between the Realist and the Nominalist becomes even sharper (Irwin 143). Throughout the two novels, there is a lingering question about meaning and names: the necessity of giving names and the meanings of names are questioned. Later, we find the answer: yes, names are necessary, because they keep something human. During the conversation with the Duchess, Alice realizes that a person is neither more nor less than the name they are given, because society only sees the name as a label, and treats people as if their name described everything about the person behind the name. Furthermore, how they are treated and the opportunities they are given are matched to this prejudiced idea. Based on their name they start to transform into the equivalent of this one-sided description, in addition, the transformation of the original person is happening in every case even if the prejudiced idea is opposed to the original personality. This is often referred to as a “logical absurdity” (Holmes 134), which is a perfect example of how children have a hard time separating themselves from others. With the previously mentioned aids, children can discover the difference between “I” and “not I”, and they can seclude themselves from their milieu. Rosemary Jackson says the following:

At the heart of this confusion is the problematic relation of self to other, the ‘I’ and the ‘not-I’, the ‘I’ and the ‘you’. Todorov divides the contents of fantastic literature into two groups: the first dealing with themes of the ‘I’, and the second dealing with themes of the ‘not-I’. Fantasies in the first group are constructed around the relationship of the individual to the world, with the structuring of that world through the I, the consciousness which sees (through the eye), perceives, interprets, and places self in relation to a world of objects. This relation is a difficult one in the fantastic: vision can never be trusted, senses prove to be deceptive, and the equation of ‘I’ with the seeing ‘eye’ proves to be an untrustworthy, indeed frequently a fatal affair. (29)

Humpty Dumpty brings a new problem into this equation – the problem of language and intent, or more specifically, the lack of intent. “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty says in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less’” (Carroll 169). For example, he uses the word ‘glory’ with an entirely different meaning to what it is supposed to mean, yet he expects everyone to know HIS meaning. For him, glory means the following: “‘I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,” Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course, you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’” (Carroll 364). To develop this idea further,

let us imagine that someone could come up with an existing phrase or concept, attach a different meaning to it, and expect everyone to know what they mean as a new way of using the word, and join their attempt at language renewal. To do this, a wider audience needs to be familiarised with the word and the new concept behind it, but in the case of Humpty Dumpty, it is questionable whether he intends to let other people understand his meaning. Does he intend to make his concepts known to the world and spread them? Approaching Humpty's terminology from a different angle, a stranger has very little chance of knowing the meaning he attaches to it; however, if he persists, Humpty has a chance to spread his concepts, and at some point he may be able to engage in a conversation with mutual understanding (Irwin 144).

The linguistic side of Carroll's work is much deeper than this essay can handle, but the topic is important nonetheless. In Humpty's case, sometimes his speech can be considered nonsense, because it is grammatically correct, it contains familiar words, yet it is still hard to understand, and furthermore there are no consequences or connections that are associated with our everyday life (Pitcher 594). George Pitcher, in his essay "Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll", describes nonsense as something that causes a fundamental and confusing error (593). He also distinguishes two types of nonsense: the type that is clear, which does not hide itself, and disguised nonsense, which he describes as follows: "Disguised nonsense has a surface air of plausibility and naturalness about it, so that it can take in even a sensible man. It has the semblance of sense. But when one examines it carefully and follows out its consequences, its inherent absurdity becomes manifest" (Pitcher 592). Humpty's speech can be considered disguised nonsense, because of its unique pattern and how he presents himself and the reasoning behind his words. With regard to nonsense, Alice is in a special position, as is the fantasy reader. In the case of Alice, she is young and still learning in every respect; her sense of nonsense is still developing, so it can easily be changed or even manipulated. This is why she can easily accept Wonderland and adapt to it. On the other hand, the readers of the fantasy books are prepared to accept and even conquer the nonsense of the new worlds and to have fun with it.

[3] The Possibilities of *Alice*

Let us imagine that we are finally in Wonderland, and this strange world is our reality. We have rules, of course, which are set up by the author, and "Wonderland now exists in its own ontological space" (Garrett 24). Therefore, we own a pocket dimension in the form of a book. Laws, concepts, philosophy, animals, and people are all similar, yet at the same time illogical and foreign. Lewis Carroll's work can be used to explore the possible world theories which claim that our actual world is only one world among many. We call it "actual" not because it differs in kind from all the rest, but because it is the world we inhabit. We can imagine many worlds where certain things happen differently, yet there are some things which remain the same (for example that $2+2$ always equals 4). Every statement can be true in a different world if it is possible in ours (Ryan and Bell 7). Garrett, assessing

definitions of how we can differentiate between various types of possible worlds, writes the following:

‘Possible Worlds’ presuppose a difference between actual and possible existence (or states of affairs). ‘Fictional Possible Worlds’ refers to ensembles of nonactualised possible states of affairs. ‘World’ refers to a closed state of affairs that can be defined in relation to other closed states of affairs. ‘Actual World’ refers to a realised possible world that is perceived by human senses. ‘Textual Actual World’ refers to a possible world that represents the actual world within fiction, but is not a simple model or imitation. (2)

However, this other world is rather strange, and the link between the real and fictional world is made through allegorical association, mostly via ideals and ideas.

Relating to possible worlds, there is another theory that is often discussed: the counterpart theory. According to Alice Bell, we can think about people like frames, and inside the frames, the content can differ to a certain degree (Ryan and Bell 26). I would like to demonstrate this with an example: I am a student now focusing on my research, but I could also say I am a veterinarian, and it would not be a lie, because according to counterpart theory I can assume that there is a world where there is a “me” who is a veterinarian. She is a distinct individual, yet similar enough to be considered my counterpart. Nevertheless, the statement about my counterpart still holds some sort of truth, because in some world I might be a veterinarian. The reason this should be mentioned lies in one of Alice’s traits; the narrator states that she likes to think of herself as two. This can be considered a confession of a mental illness; however, considering Wonderland and the phenomenon of the dream, we could say that Alice is a counterpart, and this can be seen as the meeting of different Alices, who merge into one.

The falling of Alice is brought up several times, and she hints at how she knows this story will one day be written as if Alice knows about the outside world. This leads us to the topic of *isekai*. But what is *isekai*? According to Curtis Lu,

It’s a tough and unsatisfying way of life, and you wonder, *Is this ever going to end?* A sudden wave of dizziness hits you, causing you to stumble. Your trip into the open road, a truck coming full speed right towards you, and you close your eyes. When you open them, you find yourself surrounded by gigantic trees you have never seen before. An unfamiliar animal scurries away from you, causing you to regain your senses. You know it in your mind and your heart. You’ve finally escaped the concrete jungle that was holding you captive to a mundane life. You’re in a new world with new rules where you can begin anew. This is what’s called *isekai*. (2)

Isekai can be translated as “different world”, and as mentioned before, *isekai* as a genre takes place in a different world. The protagonist is often young (mostly a high school student), or if they are older, they often transform into their younger self or even into a different child. The *isekai* genre is just one of the many sub-genres in Japanese media. It can easily be mixed with multiple genres, and the protagonist is often dropped into

a world based on another book, or perhaps a movie. In one of the most commonly known examples, the protagonist falls into a game. Their existing knowledge is often not that useful, or it is too useful (meaning the protagonist becomes overpowered) in the given situation, and the things they are familiar with start to change. The story comes to life again, and power falls into the hands of the narrator. The world treats the protagonist and the reader as unknown acquaintances, and the only certain thing to them is the uncertain. Since *isekai* is so transformative and malleable, audiences can find whichever story suits their personal interests and needs. These qualities seem to suggest that *isekai* is a revolutionary genre with the power to satisfy millions (Lu 6). The author has complete freedom with whatever world they decide to create, which means that no two stories are the same. Moreover, *isekai* is easily accessible to people from various backgrounds, resulting in stories that are both easy to relate to and also effortless to consume. The genre was born in Japan, but it is now popular throughout the entire world.

In *isekai*, we can observe abstract concepts without the interference of our own world, since anything and everything is possible in a fictional world. Moreover, the writer can make it a real test of ethics and morals. In *isekai*, the main character still has the education of our world. He or she is still trying to match their behaviour to what they know, but the pressure of the new world begins to bring out their true personality. Usually, the reader has the same upbringing as the protagonist, and can therefore sympathize with their struggle. At the same time, when the character breaks under pressure, the reader may be judgemental or ask themselves: could I withstand this pressure, or would I do the same? In *isekai*, the individual starts to realize and confront the rules of the new world. They encounter new scenarios that are often violent, for example fighting monsters, various creatures, or humans. They are usually much more powerful in some ways, so when they face a life-and-death situation, their conscience (or the lack thereof) will decide their fate. Most *isekai* incorporate the concept and power of magic, and use the possibilities of fantasy to their fullest. Garrett writes the following in reference to Ryan and Ruth Ronen:

Discussing fictional texts in terms of possible worlds allows us to talk about ‘truths’ asserted in those texts (be they possible, impossible, actual, alternate, non-actual or counterfactual) without reducing the text to a mere representation of the world we live in. This establishes a new textual actual world with its own laws, norms and knowledge — at once complicating and, to a degree, strengthening fiction’s ontological structure because impossibilities become important world-building devices. Therefore, fictional possible worlds can describe impossible states of affairs with a set of modal restrictions (world-building rules) that makes the non-actual possible world ‘true’ in and of itself. (45)

Alice is trying to assert herself in a new world, where everything is new to her. She often questions herself and her surroundings, but the biggest question is whether Wonderland can exist without her or not.

One of the main concerns is how to balance her own world and the eccentric world of Wonderland. Wonderland is illogical, often scary, yet she must try to be herself, the Alice

that everybody knows back at home. Considering Alice's age and this inner conflict, I consider *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to be a Western example of *isekai*. She knows the differences between the two places (home and Wonderland) and tries to adapt; moreover, she discovers the new world alongside the reader.

[4] *Alice through the Japanese Glass*

Alice's tales have inspired plenty of stories over time. We can think of the movie *Sucker Punch* (2011), directed by Zack Snyder, where mental instability brings the characters into a different world, where they can try to solve their problems. But Snyder was not the only one to see an opportunity in the concept of Wonderland.

We can give more examples, such as *Alice in the Country of Hearts* (ハートの国のアリス〜Wonderful Wonder World〜) and *Lost Alice: Destined lovers in Wonderland* (2016), a Japanese female-oriented visual novel and an otome game. The game is a re-imagining of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The popularity of *Alice in the Country of Hearts* is shown by the fact that multiple sequel games have been made, and many manga series based on it have been published. An original video animation adaptation was announced for release in 2008, but it was postponed, and an anime film adaptation was produced at a later date. But before continuing the list of relevant adaptations, I shall also explain the basics of anime terminology, to understand more about the following paragraphs and to show how widespread Carroll's influence is.

Japanese animation has its own terminology, and Christopher Bolton's book *Interpreting Anime* introduces a few different concepts – for instance, the difference between an anime episode, an OVA, and a full-length anime movie – and it manages to delineate the segmentation of the genre. An anime is usually 21–25 minutes long, including an opening and an ending, which are attention grabbers with catchy songs. Most of the OVAs are longer than 25 minutes, but they retain the opening and the ending segments (Bolton 1). The next category is the otome game, also referred to as a female-oriented visual novel. Otome, meaning virgin or pure woman, usually refers to the personality of the consumer, who has little or no romantic experience. The games are full of attractive men and the storylines are mostly neglected, considered less important than the possibility of an emotional response. These novels often offer a safe space and the chance to escape reality, to heal emotional scars, or to feel wanted in a romantic way. To support this, the players can replace the character's name with their own. There are examples of this in *Alice in the Country of Hearts*, where the name is set, but the responses to various scenarios are up to the player, and based on their decisions the story can have a romantic or tragic ending. This kind of escapism is unique to Japanese culture, but it was quickly picked up by a Western audience as well. Bolton also shows that anime, manga and art can all be used as a form of escapism (20–24).

The next adaptation is *I Am Alice: Body Swap in Wonderland*, a new ongoing series in 2022 that is retelling the story of *Alice in Wonderland* in a uniquely hilarious light: Alice switches bodies with a boy, and together they must journey on a crazy quest through

Wonderland. In *Alice in Murderland* (2014), the focus is on the concept of the tea party. Japan has a rich tea culture, but in Alice's case, it becomes a murderous game of survival.

One of the most popular adaptations is *Pandora Hearts*, by Jun Mochizuki (2009). The main protagonist Oz falls into Abyss, which is the equivalent of Wonderland. In the original setting, it would not be a problem, but this Wonderland is the home of human-eating monsters. Here he is saved by Alice, but the character of Alice splits into two: the greedy, black-haired little girl with anger issues who can turn into a black rabbit, and the white, modest, clever Abyss who suppresses every unpleasant emotion. Later on, we discover that Abyss is from the future, and she tries to protect herself from the future pain that changed her into the monster she is now. In this adaptation, Alice is the embodied version of Abyss, also known as Wonderland, and without her, the whole world collapses. This manga raises questions such as what would happen without Alice, and whether Wonderland could survive on its own.

The last adaptation in our discussion is called *Queen of Hearts in Wonderland*, created by Narumi Yuki and Yohachi (2019). This ongoing manga is an *isekai* based on the viewpoint of none other than the Queen of Hearts. The Queen's original soul is dead, and in her body is a girl who loved the original story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Her goals are to change the fate of Wonderland and to protect Alice, who is surprisingly presented as a boy. The Queen's new personality is liked by her subjects, and Alice has deeper feelings towards her. As mentioned before, the series is still presently ongoing in English (May 2022), and the ending is uncertain at this time, but the recent chapters show how hard it is to be transferred from one world to another, especially if you know your fate and love the story itself. As a reader of Carroll's novel, the Queen wants to keep the ending and the events the same, but at the same time, she has human emotions and wants to live, be happy, and be loved.

There are countless other Alice adaptations, but almost all have the same issue: the sexualization of children. Japanese art has a tendency to sexualize minors or adults with youthful appearances. There are even dedicated words – which have become the names of genres – to describe the look of such people, i.e. *shota* (cf. “young boy”) or *loli* (cf. “young girl”), as well as the fans of the look, i.e. *shotacon* and *lolicon*. Bolton also touches on these genres briefly and writes about how American scholars have had to testify in child pornography trials because of the indecency of the artwork (285). Pornography trials are not that common in Japan, and these genres are quite popular, despite their immorality (as seen from the Western point of view). And here is the problem with Alice: the obsession with this little girl and how they use her character. During my research about the retellings of Carroll's work, I often encountered *hentai* (porn, drawn/animated porn) showing Wonderland's heroine. Japan is often seen as a country that is fond of rules, a society that functions like clockwork and prioritizes the collective over the individual. This is exactly why sexual diversities and anomalies are common in Japanese society. Bolton refers to this as sexual anxiety (III), and it is not uncommon to find *hentai* about snakes and beasts having forced intercourse with powerless humans, or empowered people using weak beasts to pleasure themselves. These themes can also be discovered within the universe of Alice adaptations.

[5] The Uncommon Nonsense

“And what is the use of a book’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversation?’” (Carroll 6) – Alice asks this question at the beginning of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Although the journey of Alice has been illustrated by various artists, this question helps us discover a new layer of the story. Alice finds joy in reading not because of the text itself, but for other reasons. According to Roland Barthes, the pleasure of reading is not something we can easily describe, since it is influenced by the text, our mood, the environment, tastes, and our ability to understand what is written (52). Yet every reader is driven by the desire to learn, which is a passion that cannot be extinguished, and this encourages us to skip through some snippets of text, to play with the text, and to unravel its mystery. These connect the readers, yet we have to distinguish between two types of readers. One pays attention to the twists and turns of the story, focuses on the length of the text and ignores the subtleties of language. The other type slips over nothing, pays attention to language, and prefers the linguistic side of the text; the story itself does not matter, only the way it is written (Barthes 53–54). Yet Alice and most children are somehow different; they are visual, and they need pictures to captivate their minds and help them learn about the magic of books. Alice's method of reading and her choice of books can be discussed, but not judged. Barthes states that as readers, we are not to decide on the quality of the text and should not comment on other people's preferences. We should simply find out whether a text is for us or not. Barthes states that the reader is on a search for a very fundamental feeling, which he defines the following: “that's it for me! This is ‘for me’” (Barthes 13). And this is the point where a connection can be built between different individuals, because pleasure can be a bridge that spans cultural and other differences. The pleasure of the text makes the historical, cultural, and psychological background of the reader disappear, while the strength of taste, values, and memory, as well as the reader's relationship with language, are pushed into a crisis. In fantasy and *isekai*, the reader's location and culture do not matter. The writer provides us with a story, but the real power lies in the hands of the reader, and in the strength and charm of the characters.

In the case of the Japanese interpretations, there is harmony between pictures and texts, and both help us to understand the stories presented. They can be considered “cartoons” or “comic books”, but their content is also made for an adult audience. We can see in the descriptions that the settings of the stories are different, but most of Carroll's characters are easily recognizable, even if they are drawn in different styles. Japan has changed Alice's gender, yet the name has remained the same. It is the same with the other characters: the Hatter always has a silly hat, the Cat has its grin, and the White Rabbit is always late with his pocket watch in his hand. In the case of Alice, she always has a new world or a nonsense situation to which she needs to adapt. Using a young protagonist has its merits, as children have the power and courage to ask questions. They have the ability to grow into anything, and this is what charms the readers of *isekai*: the endless possibilities children can have. In *Pandora Hearts*, the two sides of Alice are shown. On the one hand, she wants to be at her home and tries to fight off everything that has the possibility of preventing that. She is partly a monster of Wonderland, but her rational

side is the one that rules her life. On the other hand, Abyss shows the possibility of losing ourselves in fantasies and in the future. The inspirations for these works are the same; Alice always falls into the unknown, and the new versions of her stories excite readers as much as the original works do. The readers can meet their childhood favourite in a different setting while experiencing a new, possible version of the stories or create one that suits their taste.

But there is a question that still needs to be answered: why are authors choosing children as protagonists? Nostalgia is one of the reasons, but more importantly, children's minds work differently, they pick things up and learn much quicker than adults, as they have not yet closed their minds toward the magical and the fantastic. As mentioned before, this has a dangerous side. The fantastic can distort the mind, making it hard to see the difference between reality and imagination. Even if children's upbringing is normal, just like Alice's, when they encounter the uncommon, they can adapt. The audience and the reader follow this process of adaptation and join in with the journey, rediscovering the joy and excitement of emotions that are not rooted in culture, age, or time. It is only up to our fantasy and our curious mind to discover and see the uncommon as a place of many possibilities, and as a long journey that can free our minds.

[Bibliography]

- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment; The meaning and importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Bolton, Christopher. *Interpreting Anime*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice found there*. London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2015.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McLintock, London: Penguin Book, 2003.
- Garrett, Craig. *A Wonderland of Possible Worlds*, MA Thesis in Creative Writing, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264458055_A_Wonderland_of_Possible_Worlds> Accessed: 28 February 2022.
- Gubar, Marah. "On Not Defining Children's Literature." *PMLA*, 126.2 1 (2011): 209–216. JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41414094>> Accessed: 28 February 2022.
- Holmes, Roger W. "The Philosopher's *Alice in Wonderland*." *The Antioch Review* 19.2 (1959): 133–149. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/4610140>> Accessed: 28 February 2022.
- Irwin, William. "Authorial Declaration and Extreme Actual Intentionalism: Is Dumbeldore Gay?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73.2 (2015): 141–147. JSTOR, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43496554>> Accessed: 28 February 2022.

- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Taylor and Francis e-Library, 2009.
- Lu, Curtis. "The Darker Sides of the Isekai Genre: An Examination of the Power of Anime and Manga" (2020). *Projects and Capstones*: 1009. <<https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1009>> Accessed: 28 February 2022.
- Pitcher, George. "Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll." *The Massachusetts Review*, 6.3 (Spring-Summer 1965): 591–611 JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25087331>> Accessed: 17 June 2022.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure and Alice Bell. "Introduction: Possible Worlds Theory Revisited." *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*. Eds. Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 1–44.
- Weisberg, Gabriel P. "Aspects of Japonisme." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 62.4 (1975): 120–130. JSTOR <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25152585>> Accessed: 28 February 2022.

[Address]

*Doctoral School of Human Sciences, PhD Program in Philosophy
University of Debrecen
Egyetem tér 1.
4034 – Debrecen
Hungary
kormosreku96@gmail.com*

Réka Kormos is a Modern Philosophy PhD student at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. She received her BA in Liberal Arts, and her MA in Aesthetic and Art Theory at the same institution. Her fields of research are the understanding and interpretation of Japanese literature and art despite the differences in cultural environments. In addition, she explores the topics of fantasy, magical realism, possible world theories, and isekai.