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An Exhibit to the Impossible: Finding Oneself Through Wonderland's Agential Objects

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Skidmore College

An Exhibit to the Impossible:
Finding Oneself Through Wonderland's Agential Objects

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EN 376

Professor Black

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Introduction—The Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace: A Victorian Wonderland

In May of 1851 in London, England, the Crystal Palace opened its doors for the Great Exhibition.¹ Two months after its opening, Charles Ludwidge Dodgson entered through the Palace doors. Stalls from thirty-two nations with goods from the mundane to the extraordinary lined the sparkling enclosure. Made of glass and iron, the Crystal Palace was uniquely modern, representing a vision of the future. The Crystal Palace was a spectacle in its construction as “the building had been slotted together so quickly that some observers enjoyed pretending that magic rather than engineering had been responsible” (Douglas-Fairhurst 58). Within this modern structure hundreds of thousands of exhibits covered fourteen acres packed with onlookers of all social classes.² As Dodgson walked through this greenhouse of inventions, he saw amazing and peculiar things. Objects of industry and nationhood, raw materials like biscuits and oats, envelope folding machines, diamonds, and baroque birdcages were all on display within the glass enclosure (Freedgood 143). Onlookers took in this abundance of objects within the palace and left with a new sense of wonder about their world.³ The Great Exhibition was “a technically wonderful circus which took attention away from poverty and politics and introduced another of its aspects: the visit” (Purbrick 11). Most significantly, it was a spectacle that forced viewers to think differently about the place of objects in their world because objects were displayed and visually consumed. Though it would eventually lead to their develop as commodities, the objects on display at the Great Exhibition still had their meaning to denote them as things. (Purbrick 15). This event was influential in its effect on Victorian society and consumer culture. As Dodgson

¹ The organizers of the Great Exhibition chose Joseph Paxton’s design for the Crystal Palace. Paxton was a botanist and greenhouse architect (Richards 19).

² The Crystal Palace can be seen as a modern structure for it was constructed of industrial materials such as prefabricated glass and iron (Purbrick 2).

³ Dodgson himself referred to the Exhibition as “a sort of fairyland” (Douglas-Fairhurst 58).

left the Crystal Palace, the Great Exhibition would stay with him. In 1865, under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, Dodgson would publish his story about a girl who falls into a fantastical world and has adventures with whimsical creatures, interacting with enchanted objects all to explore an elaborate “greenhouse” of a story. This book was titled *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll’s story, accompanied by John Tenniel’s illustrations, is inseparable from objects’ new significance of objects to invoke wonder in Victorian culture.

Charles Ludwidge Dodgson, more commonly known today as Lewis Carroll, might appear to us today as puzzling as the Mad Hatter’s riddles. Yet this mathematician, inventor, deacon, illustrator, and author was a product of his time, as he incorporated facets of Victorian culture into *Wonderland*. On January 27, 1832, Carroll was born Charles Ludwidge Dodgson, growing up in the Cheshire parish of Daresbury with his nine siblings. In his youth he was always imagining new worlds, building doll houses, reading stories, and seeking out “novel ways of cutting people and objects down to size,” which would connect to his interest in photography—specifically, microphotography (Douglas-Fairhurst 38).⁴ On his fourteenth birthday Carroll went to Rugby, an all-male boarding school that tested his sanity. Among his athletic counterparts Carroll preferred the solace and company of the library. At nineteen he followed his love of mathematics, attending Oxford University and eventually becoming a mathematician and deacon. However, Carroll continued to seek the imaginary as an escape from his dull reality in his adult life (Douglas-Fairhurst 39). This place of escape called *Wonderland* was a piece of Carroll’s imagination that was greatly influenced by his own reality. Carroll’s

⁴ Carroll was interested in many types of photography including microphotography. Daguerreotypes were invented in 1839, so Carroll would have looked at those and learned from that process, which was time-consuming and delicate. Carroll’s interest in the physical creation and representation of images is important, for it demonstrates how Carroll sought to create worlds that re-imagines reality.

biography and interests emphasize the kaleidoscope of factors in his specific historical moment that shaped his conception of Wonderland.

Carroll created Wonderland, but John Tenniel's illustrations are essential to capturing Wonderland's whimsy. Carroll discusses the importance of pictures in novels when Alice states, "And what is the use of a book... without pictures and conversation" (Carroll 7). This remark demonstrates Carroll's own views on the importance of illustrations, further emphasizing Tenniel's integral role in Wonderland's creation. Two iconic illustrations that demonstrate how these drawings capture Wonderland's whimsy is when Alice meets the King and Queen of hearts, and when the Cheshire cat disappears at the end of chapter six. [see fig. 1 and 2] The dramatic height difference between the Queen and Alice as well as the Queen's dramatic expression, and the creepy smile on the Cheshire Cat's face, all detail how Tenniel's additions are crucial to forming Wonderland. John Tenniel was an avid artist from childhood,⁵ studied fine arts at the Royal Academy, but mostly illustrated for *Punch* magazine,⁶ beginning his tenure at the magazine in 1850. While working at *Punch*,⁷ Tenniel created numerous images that illustrated the social upheaval and disorientation of the Victorian period. His employment at *Punch* also allowed Tenniel to meet notable figures such as Charles Dickens and later Lewis Carroll (Morris 43). Although Carroll initially created illustrations for his novel, Orlando Jewitt among others persuaded Carroll to seek a professional illustrator,⁸ as Carroll "admired and

⁵ On June 10, 1893 Tenniel's knighthood was announced; this was "a significant step; a black and white illustrator had at last been recognized throughout the Empire" (Engen 144).

⁶ *Punch* was an influential satirical magazine of the time, and even coined the phrase "Crystal Palace" after publishing a piece on the Great Exhibition.

⁷ *Punch* was a popular magazine that Carroll would have been reading before he wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Engen 69).

⁸ Orlando Jewitt was an engraver from Camden Town. He had previously engraved mathematical diagrams for Dodgson and was known for his meticulous, architectural, and scientific wood engravings. Carroll greatly respected Jewitt and was therefore persuaded to seek an illustrator as many had tried to convince him before Jewitt (Engen 69).

attempted to emulate his Pre-Raphaelite friends' work" (Engen 68), but his amateur drawings could not encapsulate the whimsy and strangeness of Wonderland (Engen 69). However, Tenniel was able to accomplish this task as he described his own illustrations as "grotesque," which was perfect for Wonderland (Morris 182). It is important to note that grotesque does not mean fantastic but, rather, "an unresolved clash of incompatibles" (Morris 182). This "clash" can be seen through Tenniel's graphic line work and helps encapsulate Wonderland's atmosphere. Wonderland is a dichromatic place that results in a clash between fascination and disorientation from wondering in an unknown world. Through experience with much trial and error, Alice figures out how to successfully navigate Wonderland, despite her awe and anxiety regarding this new place. It is in the darker, unknown side of Wonderland with evil Queens and mysterious potions that "grotesque" imagery is necessary to translate the full essence of Wonderland. Tenniel's illustrations help Carroll's words to create Wonderland, and it is through this relationship of word and image that the reader is transported into Wonderland's magical, disorienting, and at times unsettling world.

Before turning to Carroll's work, we must journey from the Crystal Palace into the world of objects, things, and commodities. For purposes of this paper's argument, objects, things, and commodities all have distinct definitions. Objects are three-dimensional physical figures or structures that serve a purpose. Things are objects that have intrinsic meaning that goes beyond its intended physical purpose, and a commodity is an object with monetary value that is exchanged. Thing theorist Bill Brown helps establish these distinctions, for when objects become things, he argues, there is an "inalienability of certain possessions, 'imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners,' that must not circulate and are not subject to exchange" (Brown 44). Because of individual significance, things take on identities—and with that,

metaphysical value—that cannot be traded for money or between physical hands. When objects lose this meaning, they are only defined by their materiality and become commodities after all symbolic designation is lost. The Great Exhibition as an event emphasizes how spectacle plays a key importance in displaying objects; how they are displayed can make them things or commodities (Richards 21). At the Exhibition there were no price tags, making it impossible for physical monetary exchange to occur (Richards 38).⁹ The Great Exhibition was a turning point in how people interacted with objects. The exhibition was full of both objects and things, but marked a point in time where the idea of consumption would sprout, leading to the fetishism of the commodity. That said, without price tags and with no purchases permitted, objects on display in the Crystal Palace could strike the eye as pure wonder or whimsy—a fairyland constituted of magical things.

To bring Alice’s adventures to life, Carroll shuffles our world to create Wonderland. In his story, Carroll uses agential objects to indicate that the objects of Wonderland are things whose meanings are defined by their vitality. He inserts critiques of society through creating an allegorical world meant for a child, and therefore allows an adult to gain a deeper meaning. In this paper, I am interested in Wonderland as a textual analogue to the Crystal Palace, a magical place where objects—resisting commodification—intensify their unique magic and provide Alice with both adventure and opportunity to mature, as Alice must overcome challenges brought on by these agential objects that come to life. I will begin my argument by placing *Alice in Wonderland* within the genre of children’s literature, a category of imaginative writing deeply interested in maturation and acceptance. Then, throughout the paper, I blend theorizing work on

⁹ The lack of price tags was purposeful as they would have both obscured the physical objects at the Great Exhibition and displayed to its viewers the harsh reality—that these objects were attainable only for the very wealthy, compromising the sense of enchantment the commissioners of the Exhibition desired (Richards 38).

“thing theory,” social history regarding what has been called “Victorian thing culture,” with close textual analysis of Carroll’s and Tenniel’s magical objects in the story. Of particular interest to me are the roles animals, doors, keys, potions, and cards play in the text. As my reader will see, I claim that objects and Alice’s interactions with them raise questions about perception and subjectivity. For an object to have meaning it must be perceived, but that perception is based on the subjectivity of the viewer, so the meaning that is given to an object is formed by the individual. Thing culture always requires the perceiver: the object needs the seeing subject, and how Alice visualizes and perceives Wonderland allows us to see the magical and agential qualities it gives its objects.

I. Allegory and Wonder: Making Sense of the Self in Children’s Literature

Carroll constructs Wonderland as a space for his readership to understand the world during the unprecedented technological advancement of the Victorian period. The comprehensible structure of children’s literature allows children to make sense of a world they do not yet understand. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim explains, “Just because his life is often bewildering to him, the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this complex world with which he must learn to cope” (5). Bettelheim highlights how fairy tales are integral to children’s comprehension of their world because the genre gives them the rules and solutions to problems so they can succeed. By reading fictional stories that describe experiences reflective of reality, children learn to face problems and cope with adversity. This function is seen in Carroll’s story as Alice learns to cope through the ‘bewildering’ complex systems of Wonderland. Alice learns through experience. Literary scholar Gillian Beer discusses this pedagogy: “Alice is not seeking, she is only finding. Everything is unexpected yet taken for granted in her adventures” (46). Alice does not look for a specific thing or place in Wonderland;

she cannot because she knows nothing about it. She is turned upside down in the rabbit hole and lands in a place where she seems to be the only person who does not know the rules, geography, or language. Like Alice, the Victorian public, and children specifically, locate and comprehend the new facets of their world as they move through it. The Great Exhibition was, surely, unexpected. At no other time in history had such an event occurred, and so those in attendance had to learn the rules and customs of this event as Alice does in her exploration of Wonderland.

Children's literature as a genre conceptualizes the chaos of reality and acts as a vehicle for social commentary. Literary scholar Jack Zipes describes how in the Victorian period "[i]t was through the fairytale that a social discourse about conditions in England took form" (xi). By allegorizing the conditions of industrialization, the Victorian fairytale, and in turn Wonderland, appeals to children and adults. Through her adventures, Alice demonstrates to children and adults how to survive and even thrive in a new society. Alice is simply a normal girl who goes on an adventure in a new place. In doing so, she overcomes emotional and physical challenges, showing her readership they can too. One situation that tests Alice's physical strength and courage is when she swims with the mouse out of the pool of tears (Carroll 18). She also faces emotional challenges as she struggles to learn the rules and logic of Wonderland that are bewildering to her. Alice wrestles with all-consuming questions of self when meeting the caterpillar, questioning who she is by stating, "I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then" (Carroll 37). In this scene, Tenniel obscures Alice's figure with the mushroom, making her appear as the small young child she feels she is in this moment. [see fig. 3] However, with much bravery, Alice even saves a card about to be executed from the Queen's wrath. Although Alice's adventures may be small and strange, she overcomes challenges that are big to her, and that is the importance of her adventures, and all of

children's literature more broadly. To Alice, these hills are mountains as life is to children, and because she overcomes them, she proves to her readership that they too, big or small, can overcome adversity whether it be learning to understand others, standing up for those who are in need, or even beginning to find oneself. And Alice often finds herself through her interaction with wondrous objects.

II. A Thing as Something with Meaning: Thing Theory and Thing Culture

Although Alice's challenges may seem small, her perspective determines their importance, and like her experiences, the objects' importance in the story is also determined by perspective. Victorian scholar Asa Briggs states, "[p]erception of things was not just a matter of eyesight. Nor was the camera the 'impartial eye' that some of its first sponsors claimed. Almost at once it was recognized that it could distort reality rather than reflect or record it" (38). Briggs highlights how the physical experience of viewing the cultural valences behind an object is not the sole creator of its meaning. When examining a perception of an object, it is important to note how, like a photograph, objects are not physical representations of truth, but rather are of a specific time and place that is influenced by a specific cultural context. In the Victorian period, the public had a "recalibration of human significance relative to time and space" (Green-Lewis 15). This feeling of disorientation resulted in an obstructed perception of reality by the public. Briggs's ideas on perception and distortion further highlight the distortive qualities implicit in photography, but also in the meaning of objects. This perception caused by disorientation where objects are distorted results in Carroll's creation of Wonderland as an obscured reality.

This obscured reality is often formed by Carroll's use of things in Wonderland. Mundane objects are still important in the fictional and real Victorian moment; objects have meaning based on their representational qualities, so objects in Wonderland turn into things. Victorian scholar

Elaine Freedgood states, “[t]hing culture, stimulated by production, display, and reproduction, inspires the representational practices that contribute to the formation of commodity culture” (149). How a “thing” is represented, and the meaning placed on it, determines its use and importance. The representational practices of things that led to commodities were inspired by the Great Exhibition as “[i]t was the first world’s fair, the first department store, the first shopping mall. The Exhibition rooted the commodity in the sense of being near to the heart of things, of being caught up in the progress of people and institutions that dominated Victorian society” (Richards 17-18). The Great Exhibition is a paradoxical event. It created a public place where many people could come and view objects; yet the Great Exhibition eventually would lead to the operations of the marketplace, a system that would align itself to the commodity. Objects at the Great Exhibition were not full commodities, but because patrons could visually consume them through the process of browsing, objects would soon be seen for their representational qualities over their symbolic ones.

When commodities possess a sense of individual meaning, they are transformed back into a thing. Freedgood states that “commodification is undone in such interpretations: a mass-produced object becomes entirely individual; its exchange value is reversed and replaced by the “use value” of the clue” (151). Freedgood makes this claim about Victorian detective fiction, but it does illuminate Carroll’s fantastical tale. As an object becomes commodified, it begins to lose meaning, but when it becomes an individual, it gains value for being a ‘thing,’ so the object can no longer be a commodity. For instance, within *Wonderland*, Carroll personifies and animates a deck of cards. They gain autonomy and become rulers or, in some cases, subjects allegedly to be beheaded. But through their animation, Carroll brings meaning back to objects and makes them a piece of thing culture rather than a commodity. This animation is possible because “Carroll

persistently relaxes the codes that have gathered and hardened around the material world.

Anything may be the case...this is a literalistic world. It's a subgenre of objectivity and, divested of the accretions of moralism, *things* are more vividly present" (Beer 151). Like the Great Exhibition, Carroll's Wonderland showcases an abundance of things. Wonderland and the Crystal Palace are places where objects have distinct value that is not solely determined by their materiality. In Wonderland things gain meaning from their vitality, turning them into characters; this transformation highlights the role subjectivity plays in turning objects into things.

In Carroll's text and Tenniel's illustrations, numerous mundane objects obtain great value. Tenniel's renderings grant these objects, which become subjects, primary place in the composition as "both artist and author agreed upon the importance of characters over backgrounds; that the figures should dominate their settings" (Engen 75). The figures' domination of the setting in the illustrations demonstrates how this attention to the figure further emphasizes the role both things and Alice play in Wonderland. For example, consider Tenniel's illustration of the cards who paint the roses; here things dominate their setting. [see fig. 4] For these objects to be made fantastical, Carroll uses nonsense to justify the systems of Wonderland; he "crystallizes our social and aesthetic attitudes toward words and their relationship to worldly things, human intention, and the pictorial imagination" (Lerer 192). In Wonderland, nonsense allows Victorian culture and structural issues to seep through. Nonsense creates a link between reality and fiction, and Carroll uses it to alter the reader's perceptions of an object's physical abilities and meaning.

III. A Journey Down the Rabbit Hole: Identity and Perception in Wonderland

The animals in Wonderland are a category of "object" that play a key role in the story, as animals are both agential figures and reflections of current scientific discoveries and theories

within the Victorian period.¹⁰ In 1859, Darwin published *On the Origins of Species*, and Carroll was deeply immersed in this current scientific moment at Oxford (Beer 140). Positioned between the worlds of scientific reality and imagined fiction, Dodgson merges Victorian reality with the impossible in Wonderland. For example, “evolutionary theory suggested that taxonomies themselves could not be either permanent or stable if they were to offer a truthful ordering of information. Relations change: ecological systems are always in a process of adjustment. Descriptions must shift, too” (Beer 138). These shifting descriptions in how people saw species, science, and even the world were something the Victorian mindset was acutely aware of. In Wonderland, all animals talk, making them agential beings; the mouse, for instance, is “a person of authority” (Carroll 22). Tenniel’s illustration at the start of chapter three where the mouse tells his tale to the other animals highlights animals’ human qualities as the mouse stands on two legs rather than his four paws. [see fig. 5] Here Carroll creates a new hierarchy because, in Wonderland, mice are more than animals; instead they have autonomy and even power. In Wonderland, Carroll “took systems and destabilized them. Like Alice, he looked for rules, but, unlike her, he flouted them when found” (Beer 142). As Carroll destabilizes the real world, he alters the current taxonomy of the Victorian mindset. In keeping Alice a normal human girl but personifying the animals she encounters in Wonderland, Carroll challenges current hierarchical standards and practices. Carroll fashions Alice as “a taxonomic anomaly... and repeatedly she is asked not just *who* she is but *what* she is... She is used to worlds that place humans at the apex and make of little girls a favored category, but in the worlds she has entered that hierarchy does not hold sway” (Beer 143-144). In Wonderland, animals have their own hierarchy where Alice is

¹⁰ Animals are a special category of object because they are living creatures. However, from the perspective of thing theory, they are still objects because these animals gain human qualities, becoming more like people in Wonderland. Because animals experience the same category shift that objects do when they are animated into things, this category shift is why animals are also analyzed as objects.

demoted to the bottom. For instance, after the Alice and the animals race, Alice is forced to give up her box of comfits as prizes for others, and the Dodo gives Alice her own thimble (Carroll 23-24). This interaction highlights Alice's reduced rank in the animal hierarchy, and Tenniel's illustration of the event shows Alice as standing smaller than the Dodo and many of the animals around her, emphasizing that Alice is physically lower than the animals of Wonderland. [see fig. 6] As Alice begins to name and categorize creatures she meets and objects she finds, creatures simultaneously categorize her in Wonderland's own system. For instance, Alice is deeply offended when the pigeon declares she is a serpent rather than a little girl, so much that, although the pigeon does not care about the difference, Alice retorts "it matters a good deal to *me*" (Carroll 44). Alice admonishes Wonderland's power structure only when her status plummets and she finds herself at the bottom, making Alice's readership ponder competing classification systems and their standing in a world on the precipice of societal transformation.

Through her time in Wonderland, Alice travels through doors, which are physical representations of change and transformation, demonstrating how objects have symbolic value in Wonderland. Like everything in Wonderland doors gain new meaning. As objects evolve and new becomes old, "artifacts become part of everyday life, constraints issued by them that result from their capacity to exercise physical force ... by the perception of human agents that the artifact has this capacity" (Brey 84). As objects become ordinary, their constraints are determined by their physicality as they no longer have symbolic meaning. Doors, keys, and locks are at a crossroads, for, although they are mundane, Carroll and the Victorian audience give them new meaning, constructing them as "[a]rtifacts and their properties emerge as the result of their being embedded in a network of human and nonhuman entities. It is in this context that they gain an identity and that properties can be attributed to them. Hence, they are constructed" (Brey 62).

As objects gain identity they gain meaning. A door becomes more than a divider of space; the door becomes a portal to someplace new. Locks and their purpose are altered during this period since “there was an organized market in stolen goods... for this reason, locks were among the most important categories of Victorian things. So too, were the questions they posed” (Briggs 42). Locks were important at this time because of their function; they maintain privacy by withholding entry. There is no purpose in a door if all can open it; thus, locks and keys create and sustain the meaning of doors. As Alice walks through the great hall after falling down the rabbit hole, she describes: “There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked... suddenly she came upon a little three-legged table, all made of solid glass, there was nothing on it except a tiny golden key... either the locks were too large, or the key was too small... it fitted! Alice opened the door and found that it led into a small passage” (Carroll 10). This scene demonstrates the physical constraints of objects but also of Wonderland. Alice is illustrated as much larger than the door, and although she possesses the key, she is still constrained by her large size. [see fig. 7] It does not matter how a door is represented because it needs a key; it exists for the purpose of finding what opens it rather than its own individual physicality (Brey 62). Finding the key and trying it on many different doors, Alice highlights the importance of objects and their new identity in Wonderland. As Alice comes back from her swim with the mouse, she states how “everything seemed to have changed since her swim in the pool, and the great hall, with the glass table and the little door, had vanished completely” (Carroll 28). In Wonderland, a door is no longer a door and a room is not stable, as the physical structures around her that seem permanent are in flux, causing Wonderland to be in a constant state of chaos.

Within Carroll's tale Alice walks through many doors to face various constraints. While walking through Wonderland, Alice attempts to venture into a house until a footman tells her that "There's no use in knocking...I'm on the same side of the door as you are (Carroll 47). Besides Carroll's wit that is characteristic of the logic of Wonderland, doors are thresholds of the in between. Standing within a threshold of a door, one exists on a line that separates one place from another, and it is in Wonderland where "Alice crosses thresholds and makes her way past hampering doors" (Beer 249). These very doors are both metaphorical and physical, and as Alice stands between the threshold of the greenhouse and the Hatter's home, she also stands between childhood and adolescence, between who she is now and who she will become. Alice exists within the threshold of a door, trying to find where she belongs, as she is in reality dozing by the river but simultaneously within the dream world of Wonderland where she chooses one adventure after another despite the obstacles ahead of her. Throughout her journey, "Alice wants to discover, and so does the reader" (Beer 185). Alice discovers with her readers; it is a joint journey that we take with her, and doors are the physical representation of discovery. With every door Alice passes through, she learns something new, since "Alice is persistently challenged by those she meets, and the physical structures of the dream-worlds she inhabits produce challenges of their own. Domestic architecture is misshapen, humans and animals are sometimes barely distinguishable" (Beer 151). While in Wonderland, Alice's entire mindset is altered. She speaks to animals and saves speaking cards. Ordinary and mundane is nonexistent in Wonderland. The impact that doors, keys, and locks have and how they inhibit or encourage entry emphasizes Wonderland's magical shape-shifting. These ordinary objects change and become allegories for progress and time. Carroll's use of doors, keys, and locks demonstrates the importance of

objects, specifically when they are given individual meaning and the effect that meaning has on both characters and readers.

IV. A Deck of Curiosities: The Agential Objects of Wonderland

Carroll's distortion of reality through nonsense links Wonderland to the material culture of the Victorian period sparked by the Great Exhibition of 1851. In Wonderland, objects have qualities that make them different from their original form. Carroll uses nonsense as a catalyst for this transformation, enabling objects to do impossible things, for in Wonderland "nothing is unlikely because all forms of being have presence and can argue: doors, time, eggs, queens, caterpillars, cats, and hatters, oysters, gnats, and little girls – all have their say" (Beer 4).

Nonsense gives objects agency, making the unique nature of Wonderland possible. How Carroll animates his objects further demonstrates the importance of how objects are represented because "[n]otions, things, or creatures are here animated into action. And once animated they become not friends or playmates but superiors... For there, the very life of Wonderland lies in the ways in which strange things not only come alive – playing cards or toys – but how they come alive to rule" (Lerer 196). Because objects are created to "come alive" and to "rule," they are integral to Wonderland's inception. Without animated and agential objects, Wonderland would not be the dynamic place it is. The objects become corporeal as Carroll attaches meaning to them, for they live and breathe as Alice does. It is in the nonsense of Carroll's world where objects are given autonomy that Wonderland registers the importance of objects to the Victorian public.

The animation of things in Wonderland gives them meaning. In Wonderland, objects become things and the reader's role is "to find ... within an object... the subject" (Brown 12). Carroll does not explicitly state the importance of each thing in his story, but by making them agential he creates subjects from objects. This relationship between subject and object is

determined in part by the reader, as “readers, in the very act of reading, could distance themselves from the content of what they read and imagine a world of exchange in which objects relate primarily to one another while subjects watch, wonder, and consume” (Freedgood 149). Carroll gives life to these objects, but the reader creates meaning from them. By creating objects that resemble ones in reality, the reader and Alice interrogate past representations of objects, and instead they give objects new meaning based on their characteristics in Wonderland. Similar to the objects of Wonderland, Alice too is a subject as she wonders and consumes. But there is a paradoxical relationship between Alice and the things of Wonderland. Although Alice becomes a subject through Carroll’s process of placing meanings on things by turning objects into subjects, Alice transforms from a subject into an object.

The relationship between the subjectivity of objects is further explored in Alice’s interactions. In Wonderland objects are “insouciant, casually going about their own business, without any dependence on her presence. She is an interloper in their landscapes” (Beer 115). The objects do not need Alice to be alive, but they do need the reader, for Carroll gives the reader the agency to determine an object’s worth. Theorist Bill Brown discusses how “things seem slightly human, and humans seem slightly thing like” (13). The same can be said for Wonderland’s anthropomorphic cast. Although Alice is the protagonist in Wonderland, she is an accessory to the agential things in the story that rule over her because she does not possess the same autonomy as them. For instance, when Alice grows from the potion, she has no control over her size and becomes extremely cramped in the White Rabbit’s house, taking up the entire visual plain of the illustration. [see fig. 8] Rather, Alice is more like an object that is moved from room to room; she is subject to the things of Wonderland, giving objects importance through her interactions with them. Carroll use objects to emphasize the possibilities of Wonderland. Here,

the impossible is normal and what is understood to be normal is impossible. Alice even remarks “that very few things indeed were really impossible” (Carroll 11). By having objects and Wonderland itself encompass the impossible, Carroll turns objects into characters. Carroll creates a haven for objects to turn into things, while his historical moment moves towards commodifying these very things. It is in Carroll’s creation of things where Wonderland, like the Crystal Palace, becomes an exhibit to the impossible.

The first object in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* that demonstrates the importance of thing culture to the Victorian period is the drink me potion.¹¹ Although it is not “alive,” it is powerful, and its effects demonstrate the impact objects have, therefore making the object a thing, not a commodity. Tenniel illustrates Alice as curiously picking up the potion as she contemplates drinking it. [see fig. 9] As Alice goes through Wonderland growing and shrinking, she changes, and physical space is highlighted. This transition in perspective reflecting both Victorian mindset and the ubiquitous experience of growing up, as “the alarms associated with growth in Alice involve not only the flat dread the child feels at entering the boredom of adult life but the possibility that growing is not a straight pathway to human adulthood” (Beer 211). Alice cannot control her size after drinking this potion, and just as children move through life, Alice cannot control when and where she grows. Tenniel’s illustration emphasizes this extreme change by depicting Alice with an unnaturally long neck and surprised expression. [see fig. 10] Feeling angst, Alice wonders, “who in the world am I” (Carroll 14). This anxiety about growing up, changing in physical size, and maturing when feeling unprepared to do so reflects Victorian

¹¹ Carroll was very cautious and was never seen drunk. While at Oxford he owned a copy of *The Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green*, a satire on Oxford’s Brasenose College which followed Verdant Green and the lessons he learned at Brazenface College. One story described Green indulging too much at a “drinks party” and waking up with a hangover resulting in his missing chapel. Carroll, first-hand, would have seen that this story was true for many students at Oxford (Douglas-Fairhurst 60). This anecdote perhaps influenced his opinion of mystery drinks, which is shown by the consequences Alice faces for sampling the different potions in Wonderland (Douglas-Fairhurst 60).

ideas of perspective, as Victorians were forced to grow into a world they did not know. Like the Victorians, Alice is disoriented by change as well. When talking to the caterpillar, she states, “Oh I’m not particular as to size... only one doesn’t like changing so often, you know” (Carroll 42). Alice is upset and confused by her constant alteration in size as she is a paradox: she seeks adventure in Wonderland but also craves a sense of stability. It is not the act of changing that is upsetting for Alice, but rather the fact that it is continuous and unpredictable. This change reflects reality, for as we grow physically and emotionally, we can become disoriented: “because of loss, because of swelling, because they are no longer who they were. Children endure growth. They also endure growing up. The two processes do not coincide comfortably in time” (Beer 212). Alice physically grows and emotionally matures during her time in Wonderland. Through her maturation illustrated by her change in size, she embodies the discomfort that follows progress. Growing, changing, and progressing through time all are uncomfortable processes. The anxieties of the Victorian public are reflected in Alice’s growth because they too deal with growing pains representative of the period, and therefore they become interested in “the increasingly unstable space between Victorian spectators and their world: a small, controlled performance of increasing perceptual flexibility” (Green-Lewis 15).¹² The Victorian mindset was particularly focused on space because their space was transformed drastically due to industrialization.

Carroll creates this potion to capture this specific mindset caused by temporal disorientation. In doing so, he demonstrates how objects are important because of the affects they have, but also that objects have meaning in the time they are created. This meaning reveals how fictional objects within a story can have the same, if not greater, meaning than physical objects in

¹² As a result of the drastic changes in the Victorian period, microphotography arose as a popular trend and allowed the public to play with perspective. Dodgson was particularly interested in this medium (Green-Lewis).

our reality. Through Alice's growth, Carroll highlights the "controlled performance" of "perceptual flexibility" illustrating how an object can create meaning and action. This new meaning emphasizes the importance of individuality and therefore identity as it gives objects meaning: "But the identity central to both books is Alice's, and it is persistently questioned from outside and from within" (Beer 143). Like Alice, the readership of this story question their place and who they are as individuals, which represents deeper questions during this time as Victorians lose tradition and must welcome a new present to adapt to their future. Like Alice, the Victorian era's changes incite doubt. Changing times are not new but are rather part of the human experience. As Alice navigates and learns the rules of Wonderland, perhaps Carroll's readership both past and present begin to find solid ground in their reality, just as Alice does.

As Alice embraces the impossible, she begins to interact more with the agential objects of Wonderland. After her shrinking episode, she states, "It seemed quite dull and stupid for life to go on in the common way" and eats a piece of cake without mind for consequences and only out of desire for more adventure (Carroll 12). Alice's attitude towards these objects and the possibilities they offer her further demonstrates the meaning she and Carroll give to them, making objects in Wonderland agential things. The agency of things is further highlighted in the Mad Hatter's perception of time when he states, "If you knew Time as well as I do... you wouldn't talk about waiting *it*. Its *him*" (Carroll 59). Time is not just a concept but a person; it is a friend to the Hatter and the enemy to the White Rabbit as he runs around anxiously tardy (Carroll 7). This new physicality of time further demonstrates how Carroll turns objects into things which are then turned into subjects. At times it seems that in Wonderland the only way to understand things is to treat them as subjects because of their charged significance.

The cards in Wonderland emphasize the importance of objects turned into things that become personified.¹³ In 1865 when this story was published, playing cards were already in circulation.¹⁴ Thomas De la Rue ran a printing company and created an envelope-jamming machine using steam power machinery presented at the Great Exhibition. He is a notable figure, as this technology was used in his printing procedures, which included playing cards (Briggs 357). In Wonderland Carroll is fascinated with hierarchies and uses court cards for human satire as “[h]is imagination seized instead on the domineering hierarchies implicit in the numbering of the suits from one up to king and on the domestic struggles of male and female” (Beer 52). Carroll attaches social commentary to the cards which gives them symbolic meaning, making them more than just objects in the story. By turning the cards into figures with social commentary, Carroll turns objects into things that become subjects with meaning. The cards gain new symbolic meaning through this alteration and lose their representational qualities, so they no longer exist as just objects. Tenniel emphasizes the cards’ importance with his “use of suspended action... a device which culminated in the final frenzied attack of playing cards sprayed over Alice” (Engen 81). Although this technique was used sparingly, when Tenniel employed this “suspended action,” it highlighted the importance of what he was depicting. [see fig. 11] Through this added attention on the cards with Tenniel’s illustration, Carroll creates “a sensuous object with connections to people and places *beyond* the novel that have meaning *in* the novel” (Freedgood 154). The cards’ connections to Victorian society beyond the novel deepens their current significance within it, highlighting their role as active subjects within Wonderland.

¹³ As a mathematician Carroll was fascinated with numbers, particularly the number forty-two. In Wonderland the King discusses the forty-second rule, the baker has forty-two boxes, and there are forty-two illustrations in the story (Douglas-Fairhurst 54).

¹⁴ Carroll did not learn to play cards until 1858 at age twenty-six after his time at Oxford. This was uncommon but could be due to “the suspicion among Victorian religious people about the dangers from cards, with their temptations to betting, time wasting and quarrelling” (Beer 51).

Paradoxically, at the end of the story, Alice gains her autonomy by removing the cards' agency and meaning, turning them back into inanimate objects. Before waking up, Alice yells at the Queen, "you're nothing but a pack of cards" (Carroll 104). Nonetheless, after Alice awakes, her dreams cause her sister to look at the world differently. Her sister imagines what Wonderland is in contrast to her "dull reality" (Carroll 106). This perspectival shift demonstrates how Alice's sister looks at the objects of her world in a new light after hearing this story, for objects are not nearly as ordinary as they appear, but as people saw them in the Crystal Palace, with a bit of magic. By reading this work of illustrated fiction, we can become like children again, gaining a new perspective on the possibilities in our reality. We see objects less as commodities and more as wondrous, agential things through a magical perception that makes an ordinary life a little more extraordinary. The impossible seems to be on display, on exhibit.

V. Waking up From a Nap: The Meaning We Gain from Alice

Both Tenniel and Carroll were responsible for shaping *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into the story it is. They create Wonderland as a place that accepts the impossible—where anyone is allowed no matter how eccentric they may be, and anything can happen. Like the Crystal Palace, Wonderland is a place that frees its readers from reality by re-imagining it. In fact, Tenniel himself used this story to confront his own reality. The first illustration he made for the story was of Alice next to her pool of tears (Engen 73). [see fig. 12] Tenniel was lost and grief-stricken while beginning his illustrations.¹⁵ His world, like Alice's, was a place where the people he once recognized were gone. The darkness in Tenniel's illustrations details the uncomfortableness that comes with change and how difficult it is to pull oneself out of their own

¹⁵ When Tenniel first agreed to illustrate Carroll's story, he was grappling with his mother falling ill. Three days before his mother died, Tenniel attended the funeral of John Leech, a close friend. These losses caused Tenniel's illustrations to focus on grief and death (Engen 73).

pool of tears. Tenniel's illustrations had an impact on even the most notable of people because of how he confronted the darkness in his own reality: "Since Alice had appeared while the Queen mourned the death of her beloved Albert, it seems Tenniel's drawings may have helped her briefly to forget her own crushing sadness" (Engen 84). Like Tenniel, Queen Victoria was grieving, and it was this charming story with its imaginative drawings where the Queen found an escape from her sad and difficult reality.¹⁶ For a moment, Queen Victoria found comfort in a story just as Alice did from her nap.

The profound impact of Carroll's text and Tenniel's depictions of objects within *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* motivated me to create a deck of cards as an essential part of my English Senior Coda. As a double major in English and Studio Art with a focus on graphic design, I wanted to produce a hybrid culminating work, that was both word and object. Graphic design looks at something ordinary like type or posters and sees it as art. Like Carroll's own work, I was inspired by his desire for a tale with visual art and how the perception of an object can make it come to life. Among the different objects of Carroll's and Tenniel's work, the cards have always stood out to me because they are the last bit of Wonderland that is left before Alice wakes from her dream. For my cards I chose to redo the suits into hearts, teacups, hats, and keys to represent important objects from Wonderland. The queen and king cards both represent the King and Queen of Hearts while the ace becomes the White Rabbit, and the Jack transforms into the Cheshire Cat. My most interesting decision was to make Alice the Joker of the set—an artistic choice based on her role within the story. In a deck of cards, a joker is not needed in

¹⁶ A three-and-a-half-year-old girl was reading *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* near Queen Victoria and was intrigued by the pool of tears drawing. [see fig.13] The Queen asked what the girl was reading, and the girl asked the Queen, "Do you think please, *you* could cry as much as that?" which reminded the Queen of her own grief. After this encounter she "expressed great enthusiasm for Carroll and afterwards sent a locket to this girl who charmed her unknowingly forgetting her own sorrow" (Engen 84).

every game, but it is necessary to be included to make the deck complete. Similarly, Alice is needed for the story to be complete, but she is not fully, and certainly not always easily, a part of Wonderland; like the joker in a deck, Wonderland is not complete without Alice. The illustration on the back of the cards incorporates a sense of whimsy that unifies the deck and speaks to my essential argument in this paper. The outside package details Alice walking into a Wonderland that resembles the Crystal Palace to demonstrate the importance of the Great Exhibition, while the back is a key that is meant to emphasize the idea of thresholds as spaces for change. For the illustrations, I took inspiration from Tenniel's tonal clarity and engraved outlines (Engen 75). The color scheme of the cards was inspired by Disney's 1951 animated adaptation, specifically the high contrast between pastels and dark purples. Additionally, I kept characters in line with their original forms, still giving Alice a blue pinafore and the Rabbit a waist coat, with changes reflecting my own illustrative style that is less linear than Tenniel's and done digitally. This deck demonstrates the importance of a thing, highlighting how meanings of things found within this story are more impactful than their physical form, emphasizing how *Alice in Wonderland* unfolds as an exhibit to the impossible. This deck of cards has intrinsic meaning in how I created it and because of what it represents: that objects are not merely physical pieces that take up unnecessary space in our lives, but rather they have significance in and to our lives.

Like Alice, readers travel through Wonderland excited for what new adventures are through each doorway. Carroll creates a world that is filled with whimsy, yet he offers unsettled remnants of reality where he provides space for readers past and present to think about their worlds and their place within those worlds. They journey with Alice and meet totalitarian cards, a Mad Hatter, and a tardy White Rabbit who through amusing and eccentric dialogue manage to create a place that is a refuge for the impossible, and also for those who do not feel they are

accepted. Alice dreams of Wonderland and escapes into this fantastical world and, although she struggles at first, after her many encounters with magical, agential objects that come to life, Alice finds herself by accepting the impossible in Wonderland, and takes these lessons with her when returning to her own reality.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a children's book from the Victorian era, but it provides so much more than a simple story, or even a glimpse into Victorian culture. Rather it is about growth, discovery, and how scary change can be. This story encapsulates growing up, becoming a conscious member of the world, and what it is like to see something for the very first time with awe. It encourages its readers to see the magic in ordinary life, to perceive objects as more than commodities, because even the smallest inconsequential things, like a playing card, have the power to come alive. By viewing the world through this lens of wonder, we walk into a textual Crystal Palace, one that is a glittering exhibit to the infinite possibilities that life has to offer when objects become animated with meaning. And it is through this threshold where we see the ordinary in a new light and discover a piece of ourselves by accepting who we are. By looking at the world with wonder, all journeyers—like Alice—enter a magnificent daydream that opens the door to a world of the impossible, and it is up to us to have the courage to walk through it.

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Figures

Figure 1: Tenniel, John. "Off with Her Head" 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 2: Tenniel, John. *Cheshire Cat Fading to Smile* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 3: Tenniel, John. *Alice Meets the Caterpillar* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 4: Tenniel, John. *Two, Five, and Seven Painting the Rosebush* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 5: Tenniel, John. *Mouse Telling Story to Birds and Alice* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

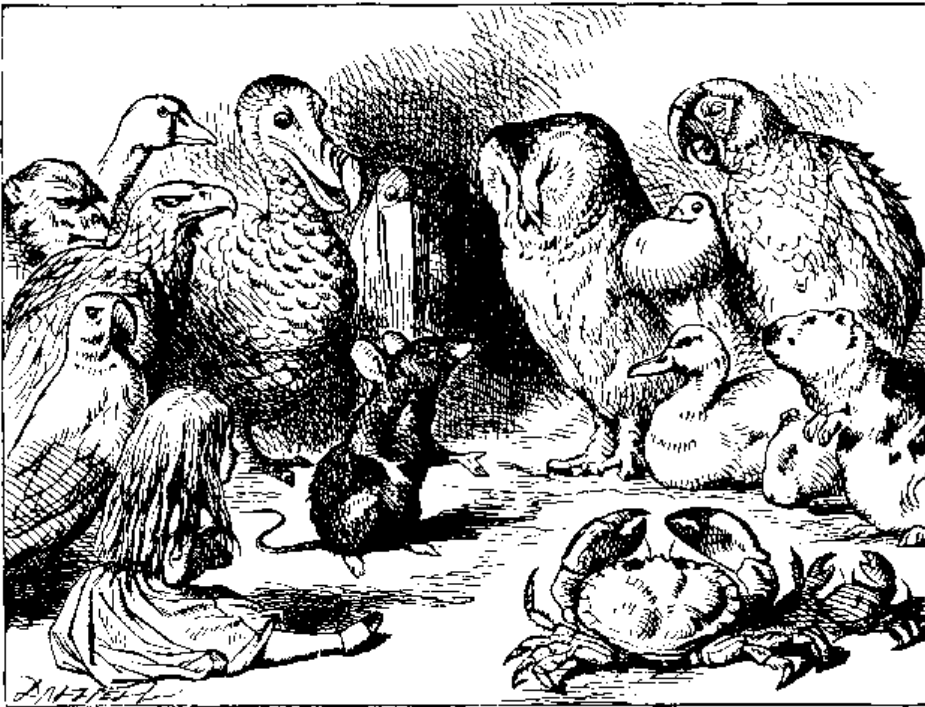


Figure 6: Tenniel, John. *Dodo Presenting Thimble* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 7: Tenniel, John. *Alice Finding the Tiny Door Behind the Curtain* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 8: Tenniel, John. *Alice Cramped in Rabbit's House* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 9: Tenniel, John. *Alice Taking "Drink Me" Bottle* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 10: Tenniel, John. *Alice Stretched Tall* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 11: Tenniel, John. "You're Nothing But. Pack of Cards" 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 12: Tenniel, John. *Giant Alice Watching Rabbit Run Away* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



Figure 13: Tenniel, John. *Alice in Pool of Tears* 1865, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

