

## The Analytical Interpretation of Classical Alice in Wonderland in the Movie Adaptations of Walt Disney (1951) and Tim Burton (2010) Through a Feminist Perspective and Symbolism

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### Abstract

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a world-wide known, fictional, British children's book with its fantastical tales and riddles by Lewis Carroll. Being translated into more than 174 languages, it has also been the source of inspiration for some famous studios like Walt Disney and movie directors like Tim Burton. In Walt Disney's adaptation (1951), the audience witnesses an Alice who is a courteous and curious child having a vast and vivid world of imagination with her neat and clean, blue-white dress. The characterization of Alice is very much similar to the book in terms of reflecting the time in which the book was written. Alice is a smart girl who is both educated according to the fashion of her time and different with her creativeness when it comes to dreaming of a "wonderland" that is full of nonsense when compared to the tedious mindset of the society in which she lives. On the other hand, Alice in Wonderland (2010) is transformed into a real masterpiece by the 21st century-movie director Tim Burton. He remains loyal to the characters; however, he presents a young, energetic Alice with a great imagination as usual. She is bolder, more independent, stronger both in mind and soul, and more feminist. In the movie, while she is considered to be mature enough to get married according to the norms and customs of 19th century England, she ends up as a dragon slaying heroine in underland. So, this paper aims to analyse how classical Alice in Wonderland is interpreted

in the movie adaptations by Walt Disney (1951) and Tim Burton (2010) through a feminist perspective and symbolism.

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**Keywords:** Feminism, Symbolism, Adaptation, Walt Disney, Tim Burton

To start with, 1951 movie adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* by Walt Disney can be considered as one of the most successful and praise-worthy productions that attracts not only children but also adults who love the motion-picture of such a “curious” classic. In this version, the scene starts with a beautiful, panoramic garden view with lots of kinds of flowers, butterflies, bees, juicy green trees, a river, and any other types of paradise-like natural elements. As the camera moves, the audience hears the voice of a governess or one of Alice’s sisters who is reading a book in her very traditional, big dress by sitting under a tree. As the lady reads, the first thing seen about Alice is her feet dangling from a branch of the tree. While the lady is busy with reading her history book, curious but bored Alice is having fun by making a flower tiara for her cat. By mistake, her cat drops the flower tiara on the lady’s head making her notice that she is not paying attention to the book she is reading seriously. On lady’s warning, Alice makes her first childish rebellious remark and says, “I am sorry, but how can one possibly pay attention to a book with no pictures in it?” (*Alice in Wonderland [1951]* 2:33-2:38). By this remark, Alice simply can be regarded as a proof that books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not much fun since they only contain words but no pictures in them. On the other hand, the lady is confronting Alice by saying in a pompous manner, “My dear child, there are a great many good books in this world without pictures” (*Alice in Wonderland [1951]* 2:38-2:44). It is obvious to see that the lady is simply a true symbol of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tediousness for Alice. Although Alice is a lucky girl who is able to reach the opportunity of education with a governess like her, she seems to suffer from the negativity of the era such as being forced to read boring history books and losing her childhood cheerfulness. Alice shows a great courage to share her opinion about books and adds, “In this world maybe. But in my world, the books would be nothing but pictures” (*Alice in Wonderland [1951]* 2:44-2:50). This sentence is a very succinct proof that Alice is not an ordinary child who was born into 19<sup>th</sup> century England; her word choice, free-spirited enthusiasm about sharing what she thinks of the pictureless books, and even her lesson-listening position on the branch of the tree are strong signs of an independent, smart, and feminist girl. As the conversation goes on “about Alice’s world”, the lady gets critical of Alice’s comment and says, “Your world? Huh, what nonsense” (*Alice in Wonderland [1951]* 2:50-2:54). The word “nonsense” is the total password

to Alice's world of imagination. After this word, Alice completely forgets about her governess and starts a sincere conversation with her cat Dinah:

ALICE. That's it, Dinah! If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what is this, because everything would be what this isn't, and contrariwise, what this is, it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?

DINAH. (meows)

ALICE. In my world, you wouldn't say "Meow". You'd say yes, Miss Alice.

DINAH. (meows)

ALICE. Oh, but you would! You'd be just like people, Dinah, and all the other animals as well. Well, in my world... (sings) Cats and rabbits would reside in fancy little houses, and be dressed in shoes and hats and trousers. In a world of my own... All the flowers would have very extra special powers, they would sit and speak to me for hours, if I'm lonely in a world of my own. There'd be new birds, lots of nice and friendly how-de-do birds, everyone would have a dozen bluebirds. Within that world of my own, I could listen to a blubbering brook and hear a song that I could understand. I keep wishing it could be that way because my world would be aWonderland! (*Alice in Wonderland* [1951] 2:55-4:51).

In this conversation, it is obvious to see that Alice has started building her own nonsense world with her sensible creativeness. Breaking free from the tediousness of the reality of reading a boring history book, she dives in a world where all the reality is nonsense, and all the nonsense is the foundation of her wonderland.

After this wondrous conversation with Dinah, she notices something that attracts her attention: a white rabbit. This rabbit looks very different in appearance by wearing a waistcoat, carrying a watch fob, and has a characteristic of an old, alarmed man. He runs away shortly after he looks at his watch, and his short journey ends by disappearing into a hole under a tree. Alice's reaction has an important point here. She automatically believes that he must be late for an important party. As she follows the rabbit, she falls into a dilemma about going after him or not. Again, what makes Alice an extraordinary girl born in the Victorian era is that she hesitates about going after him as she is not invited to the party and that would be rude to do so. What scares her is not diving into a dark, dangerous-looking hole but going to a party without an invitation which shows that she is a girl of manners and some curious adventure into the unknown at the same time.

Another interesting fact about Alice is the language she uses which is quite formal and respectful. After she falls down into the hole, she lands in a corridor in which she comes across a door. As she comes near the door to grab the doorknob, the doorknob starts talking. On turning it firmly, she

realizes that she hurts him and then says, “I beg your pardon!” and in the rest of the conversation with him, she constantly addresses him as sir. Her stylistic speech and her word choice again are a sign of being brought up in a respectful way. Although Alice has the courage to go on an adventure like a sailor into the uncharted seas; instead of being a traditional girl who is taught to stay indoors like a well-behaved young lady and follow the norms of the society, she does not give up on her quality as a respectful and polite girl. She seems to balance herself well.

As she continues her curious journey, she finds herself in a garden with full of varied flowers. All these flowers look special and unique with their colours, petals, leaves and shapes; however, they all belong to the same group of species. As a way of introducing themselves, they start singing with proud and joy. At the end of their chorus, they become inquisitorial and begin to question Alice as to what flower she is. As they notice that she is different, they become contemptuous, violent, and rude towards Alice. They call her a wildflower or even worse for them, a weed. Alice actually has no difference from all these flowers in terms of beauty with her bright blue eyes, blond hair, and neat dress. What makes her an outcast is her mobility and independency when compared to the flowers which are attached to the soil with their roots. It can be concluded that these flowers symbolize the Queen Victoria who “constantly reiterated her own opposition to women's rights and her firm belief that her sex belonged in its own separate, domestic sphere” (Rappaport 426) and any Victorian women who cannot think outside the box and only believe that their sole purpose of life is to stay in the limits where they are told to stay in. This characteristic of young Alice makes her stand out from the Victorian dependent lifestyle.

Another top-rated movie adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* is by Tim Burton, whose Alice is quite different from the classic book with its characterization and her firm stance. Burton's Alice is a true feminist figure with her actions, characteristic resolve, interaction with her friends and foes, and more in this fantastic movie. Before eliciting the feminist elements in Burton's adaptation, it is quite important to define what feminism is or what it is not. Sabbarwal, in her write-up, defines feminism as “the doctrine advancing the view that women are systematically disadvantaged and are advocating a collective or individual struggle for equality” (268). This equality is sought in every structure and level of the society such as in economy, media, art, education, politics, language, and so forth. On the top of these, feminism is not being women having hairy legs and being aggressive, and strident women, or someone who is scared of men; for that reason, looking for protection and so forth (Friedman et al. 3). If it is possible to say so, Burton's Alice is the incarnation of what feminism is.

As the movie starts, the audience sees a group of men talking in a dimly lit room to each other about a crucial topic: trading overseas out of England. As one of the men talks of his future plans about having trading posts in countries like Bangkok and Jakarta, a little, blonde girl in her night gown shows up from the corner, looking scared because of a nightmare she has had. Being her father, the young gentleman, Charles Kingsley leaves the room to gently take her little daughter, Alice back to her room to sleep. And the conversation between them is an exemplary one as it shows the audience how a father can simply build up so much courage in the small heart of a little girl with his gentle words, who will remember this to grow stronger in the future:

CHARLES KINGSLEY. The nightmare again?

.....  
 YOUNG ALICE. I'm falling down a dark hole, then I see strange creatures...

CHARLES KINGSLEY. What kind of creatures?

YOUNG ALICE. Well, there's a dodo bird, a rabbit in a waistcoat, a smiling cat...

CHARLES KINGSLEY. I didn't know cats could smile.

YOUNG ALICE. Neither did I. Oh, and there is a blue caterpillar.

CHARLES KINGSLEY. Blue caterpillar. Hmm.

YOUNG ALICE. Do you think I've gone around the bend? (He feels her forehead as if for a fever.) CHARLES KINGSLEY. I'm afraid so. You're mad. Bonkers.

Off your head. But I'll tell you a secret...all the best people are. (She smiles) It's only a dream, Alice. Nothing can harm you there. But if you get too frightened, you can always wake up. Like this. (He pinches her. She screams and pinches him back.) (*Alice in Wonderland [2010] 1:49-2:53*)

As aforementioned, this conversation is a valuable one in terms of how a little scared girl's mood is lifted by a biologically related and trustworthy figure like her father. The father has a constructive and supporting effect on a girl like Alice. Considering the fact of being a scared, little baby girl is not something surprising, or abnormal either in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or in today's world; however, the word "the little, scared baby girl" is used as a derogatory remark to highlight how ridiculous to fall into a situation like that by referring to a specific gender like men. What impressive about Charles Kingsley's attitude towards her daughter, Alice is that it is all right to get scared, and all she has to do to wake up from a nightmare with curious creatures is simply to pinch herself; in other words, to fight her fears courageously by herself without depending on others. This scene actually gives the audience a valuable clue about what kind of heroine Alice will transform into.

Another Victorian era tradition that Alice defies is marriage. In the movie, after thirteen years, the audience sees an Alice who has come of age, going to a party in a horse-drawn carriage. Feeling uneasy about the party and its tedious people, she has this conversation with her mother:

ALICE. Must we go? I doubt they'll notice if we never arrive.

HELEN KINGSLEY. They will notice. (She re-ties her waist sash, feeling for her corset.) Where's your corset? (She pulls back her dress to see bare legs.) And no stockings!

ALICE. I'm against them.

HELEN KINGSLEY. But you're not properly dressed.

ALICE. Who's to say what is proper? What if it was agreed that "proper" was wearing a codfish on your head? Would you wear it?

HELEN KINGSLEY. Alice.

ALICE. To me a corset is like a codfish.

HELEN KINGSLEY. Please. Not today. (Frustrated, Alice looks out the window and mutters.)

ALICE. Father would have laughed. (*Alice in Wonderland [2010]* 3:07-3:45)

This conversation is an actual war between two people with different mindsets, ages, and concerns about life although they belong to the same gender and the time. Alice's mother knows that the party they are going to is Alice's engagement party. According to the norms of that time, she, as a mother and a widower desires the best for her daughter, which is a suitable marriage. McDonnell also mentions the importance of marriage in that period and states that "Marriage was at the centre of everyday lives for the Victorians and its influence extended to all corners of life and was the basis on which Victorian society was established" (2). However, this institution is not something that Alice wishes to be part of. She simply starts defying it even without being aware of her engagement party by rejecting wearing a corset and stockings in which she feels restricted, and she takes them as improper for herself. She even questions what proper is and compares wearing a corset to wearing a codfish. She is obviously against the standards that are considered normal and appropriate for women unlike her. She speaks of her father at the end of her conversation with her mother since Alice knows that she and her father share the similar mentality with each other, and he would laugh at all this nonsense. Another interesting detail about Alice's perspective about gender roles is the conversation between her and Hamish who is arranged to be her husband. As they are dancing quadrille in the party, she smiles:

HAMISH. Do I amuse you?

ALICE. No. I had a sudden vision of all the ladies in trousers and the men wearing dresses. (He doesn't even smile.)

HAMISH. I think you'll do best to keep your visions to yourself. When in doubt, remain silent. (*Alice in Wonderland [2010]* 6:01-6:14)

This conversation between Alice and Hamish clearly manifests that Hamish has no respect when a woman shares her extraordinary thoughts like Alice does. It seems that it is nonsense or even unacceptable to imagine that men and women are exchanging their outfits in the unconventional way. Although he does not share his opinions on this topic in a long speech, he simply tells Alice to remain quiet if she is not able to stop dreaming about such impossible situations. Hamish's attitude is an evident example of how women are disregarded by men due to having such a vivid imagination which is thought to be lacked in women. Unfortunately, women are not only thought to lack in independent thinking, but also in other areas, as well. Burki also explains how science and the church define women in the nineteenth century. According to the church, women can only develop spiritually under the strict guidance of men who are morally superior, and for science, women are considered to be weak both intellectually and emotionally (197). Although these assumptions were prevalent in the nineteenth century, they were not correct at all when considering all the burden and the responsibilities the women had to undertake as wives, mothers, and workers.

Intimidated at the party and excited about seeing the mysterious white rabbit in a waistcoat, Alice runs away to the forest after it, and falls into a hole under a tree. Once Alice is out of the hole, she is welcomed by the extraordinary characters of the wonderland. But there is one problem: they are not sure whether she is the real Alice. To solve this issue, they go to Absolem, the old wise caterpillar, to seek for advice. He first asks Alice who she is, and Alice simply tells her name. Being in doubt, he tells them to bring the Oraculum which is an ancient timeline parchment depicting the major events of each day in underland. In the parchment, there is a special day called Frabjous Day on which Alice is expected to slay the monster Jabberwocky. On hearing this, Alice feels frightened and runs away. Unfortunately, at the same time, everyone is ambushed by the soldiers and the monsters of the Red Queen. As she walks in the forest, she comes across the tea party of the Mad Hatter, the March Hare and the Dormouse. They appear as lunatics as before at the table. While having their tea, the Knave of Hearts comes looking for Alice. After he leaves, the Mad Hatter sets out to take Alice to the White Queen to keep her safe and sound. On the road, the Mad Hatter starts talking the language of the underland:

ALICE. Sorry? What was that?

MAD HATTER. Sorry? What was what? The Jabberwock with eyes of flame.

The jaws that bite. The claws that catch... He took his vorpal sword inhand. The vorpal blade went snicker-snack. He left it dead, and with itshead...It's all about you, you know...

ALICE. I'm not slaying anything. I don't slay. So, put it out of your mind.MAD HATTER Mmm...mind.( He drops her to the ground and walks on. She follows.)

ALICE. Wait, you can't leave me here!

MAD HATTER. You don't slay... Do you have any idea what the Red Queen has done? (mimicking her) You "don't slay".

ALICE. I couldn't if I wanted to.

MAD HATTER. (accusing) You're not the same as you were before. You were much more...much more muchier...You've lost your muchness.

ALICE. My muchness? (He pokes her in the stomach with his finger.)

MAD HATTER. In there. Something's missing. (*Alice in Wonderland* [2010] 37:05-38:26)

This conversation between Alice and the Mad Hatter highlights something crucial about Alice: her identity. With this adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, Tim Burton brings out a note-worthy topic with this young Alice. He stresses the importance of Alice's search of her identity in both worlds: England of the nineteenth century and the wonderland. Ismajloska, in her article, also shares her opinion about Burton's aim in the movie, "Tim Burton's movie *Alice in Wonderland* deals with the multiple concepts of one persona by creating, from an already grown-up Alice, a character conscious of herself and of the consequences of becoming mature"(312).So, is she going to be a damsel-in-distress and yield to the derogatory norms of the nineteenth century set for women without asking them for their actual consent, or will she gain her "muchness" back and win her status as a knight in shining armour? Her life being at stake, Alice uses her own will power and her freedom to choose as to what to do for the wonderland. By choosing to slay the Jabberwocky, she both leads the wonderland to its salvation, gains her identity and her strength to make the right decision for herself.

Although Alice wins the battle in the realm of the wonderland, this time, she has another battle to win in the realm of the reality. Once, she steps out of the rabbit hole, she goes right back to the garden where her so-called engagement party is. She stands with her hair loose, her clothes ragged and messy as if she has come from a "fight". First, she confronts Hamish and tells him that she cannot marry him for not being the right man. Next, she gently holds her sister Margaret's hand and tells her that how much she loves her, and she will decide what to do with her own life. And then, she turns to Lowell who is Margaret's husband and not a faithful man. She reminds him how lucky he is to have her sister for his wife and warns him sternly to be



nice to her as Alice will be watching him closely. Finally, she talks to her own mother Mrs. Kingsley and then to Hamish's mother, Lady Ascot who mocked her for being into rabbits. Alice tells her she is fond of white rabbits very much in a sarcastic way. As for her mother, she consoles her by promising her to find something useful to do with her life which is not a marriage at all. She, at the end, turns to Lord Ascot who knows that Alice will not be his daughter-in-law but the intern, and she will take over her father's business and his dream about having trade posts in far east. However, Alice aims for a better and farther country: China. All these people are the symbols of the century in which Alice lives. They all stand for the limits, restrictions, responsibilities, dreams, obligations, and norms of the society. By standing against them, Alice shows how much she has changed both as a woman and an independent individual, which is the sole aim and representation of feminism. Consequently, it can be concluded that Burton's Alice has an artistic, humanistic, and didactic effect on the audience.

In conclusion, as Bauer and Lowne state in Britannica, *Alice in Wonderland* just was produced in a time in which children's literature was thought to be teaching moral lessons to the children; although it confused the critics first, it captured the attention of its young readers. As a result, Carroll, who was aware of how children's mind worked, managed to play with the logic of reality and made it something ridiculous to serve to the entertainment of the children. Finally, its success was not limited to the written literature, so some important motion-picture companies like Walt Disney and the accomplished, modern-era movie producer Tim Burton, "whose films have elicited the range of emotions, only proves the director and the producer's genius and his film's brilliance and uniqueness"(Prorokova 83), spice up this classic with their unique artistic skills and present their Alices in their movies that are moulded with their inspiring and creative perspectives. Walt Disney has chosen to create an Alice who is young, curious, and tidy both in appearance and personality which is suitable to the Carroll's depiction when considering it to have been written in the Victorian era while Tim Burton's Alice is bold, free-spirited, and assertive in personality who is a real feminist type. Although these two productions appear very different in many ways, the Alices they present to the audience give an impeccable experience of enjoying Carroll's Alice by remaining faithful to its original but with some difference either in classical or some heroic feminist taste.

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