

Alice in Wonderland on Screen: A Feminist and Symbolic Analysis of Disney's 1951 and Tim Burton's 2010 Adaptations

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p13](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p13)

Submitted: 16 July 2023
Accepted: 26 August 2026
Published: 31 August 2026

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Cite As:

Hasanoglu, B. (2026). *Alice in Wonderland on Screen: A Feminist and Symbolic Analysis of Disney's 1951 and Tim Burton's 2010 Adaptations*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 22 (23), 13. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2026.v22n23p13>

Abstract

This comparative study provides a critical analysis of Lewis Carroll's classic heroine, Alice, as interpreted through two landmark cinematic adaptations: Walt Disney's animated film *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and Tim Burton's live-action reimagining *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). Utilizing a theoretical framework grounded in feminist criticism and symbolic analysis, the paper examines how both adaptations reflect, subvert, or reimagine Victorian social norms, gender roles, and mentality. Disney's 1951 adaptation presents Alice as a polite, curious, and imaginative child whose resistance remains largely within the domestic and childlike sphere, serving as a subtle critique of Victorian societal rigidity. Burton's 2010 adaptation, by contrast, presents Alice as a more autonomous heroine who rejects institutionalized marriage and assumes an active heroic role. Apart from that, his adaptation transforms Alice into an autonomous, non-submissive heroine who claims her identity in the most direct and overt way, rejects institutionalized marriage, and slays the Jabberwocky, the monster of the underland. By contrasting these two visual representations, this paper illustrates the evolution of Alice from a well-mannered Victorian observer to an empowered feminist figure, highlighting how cinematic adaptations recontextualize classic literature to reflect shifting cultural paradigms regarding female autonomy in the most deserved way.

Keywords: Alice in Wonderland, Walt Disney, Tim Burton, Feminist Criticism, Symbolism, Comparative Adaptation Analysis

Introduction

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a world-renowned, fictional, British children's book with its fantastical tales and riddles by Lewis Carroll. As stated by Bauer and Lowne (2026) "Appearing at a time when children's literature generally was intended to teach moral lessons, the book at first baffled critics, who failed to appreciate the nonsense that so captivated its young readers" (para. 3). Being translated into more than 174 languages, and apart from grasping its young readers' attention, 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-and-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 in her creativity 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, Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) is a real indelible experience for the cinephiles of the 21st century. Burton remains loyal to the characters; however, he presents a young, energetic Alice with a great imagination as usual. She is more independent, bolder, 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 the classical *Alice in Wonderland* is interpreted in the movie adaptations by Walt Disney (1951) and Tim Burton (2010) through a feminist perspective and symbolism.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual and visual analysis method. The primary source materials that have been analyzed are Walt Disney's animated film *Alice in Wonderland* (1951, directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske) and Tim Burton's feature film *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). The analytical approach is grounded in two primary theoretical perspectives:

Feminist Criticism: Drawing on definitions established by Sabbarwal (2000) and Friedman et al. (1987), feminism is understood as both an intellectual doctrine and an analytical lens that examines how social structures systematically disadvantage women and how female agency, equality, and resistance are represented. Historical context regarding 19th-century female subjugation and domesticity is evaluated using insights from Burki (1975), McDonnell (2018), and Rappaport (2003).

Symbolic Analysis: The narrative elements, cinematic dress, set motifs, dialogues, and character interactions are critically decoded as symbolic representations of Victorian social norms, psychological maturity, and ideological resistance.

By systematically comparing key thematic scenes, including the introduction of Alice's real-world environment, her subversion of Victorian etiquette, her encounters with authority figures, and her ultimate narrative resolution, the paper demonstrates the socio-cultural shift in how female agency is depicted on screen through these visually rich motion-picture works.

Walt Disney's Good Alice (1951)

To start with, the 1951 movie adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* by Walt Disney can be considered one of the significant cinematic achievements 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 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 while sitting under a tree. As the governess/ elder sister reads, the first thing seen about Alice is her feet dangling from a branch of the tree. While the lady is busy reading her a 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 governess' head, making her notice that she is not paying attention to the book she is reading in a serious manner. On the 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?" (Geronimi et al., 1951, 2:33-2:38). Alice's comment may be read as a childlike rejection of didactic, text-heavy education rather than as evidence that nineteenth-century books were inherently unappealing. Since they only contain words but no pictures in them. On the other hand, the governess confronts Alice by saying in a pompous manner, "My dear child, there are a great many good books in this world without pictures" (Geronimi et al., 1951, 2:38-2:44). She clearly epitomizes what Alice views as the dull, formulaic mindset of 19th -century society. 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" (Geronimi et al., 1951, 2:44-2:50). This sentence is a very succinct proof that Alice is not an ordinary child who was born into 19th 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” (Geronimi et al., 1951, 2:50-2:54). The word “nonsense” is the total password to Alice’s world of imagination, and she uses it as the foundational concept for her imaginary wonderland. 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 a Wonderland! (Geronimi et al., 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 creativity. Breaking free from the tediousness of the reality of reading a boring history book, she dives into 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 having the characteristics 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, like a real person. As she follows the rabbit, she falls into a dilemma about whether to go 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 both a girl of manners and adventure.

Another interesting fact about Alice's language 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 are again 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 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 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 pride 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 independence when compared to the flowers, which are attached to the soil with their roots. As Rappaport (2003) states that Queen Victoria "constantly reiterated her own opposition to women's rights and her firm belief that her sex belonged in its own separate, domestic sphere" (p.426); hence, the flowers may be interpreted as symbols of social conformity and restrictive gender expectations associated with Victorian domestic ideology in which Victorian women should only believe that their sole purpose of life is to stay in the limits where they are told or educated to stay in. This characteristic of young Alice makes her stand out from the Victorian dependent lifestyle.

Tim Burton's Heroic Alice (2010)

Another top-rated movie adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* is by Tim Burton, who strips off childhood innocence from Lewis Carroll's Alice by marinating the story in his gothic style and focusing on Alice's character development through her decision-making process, which is forced both overtly and covertly by the curious characters of Wonderland. Hence, 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, interactions 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 (2000), 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" (p. 268). This equality is sought in every structure and level of society, such as in the economy, media, art, education, politics, language, and so forth. On top of these, feminism is not about 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., p.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 from 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 nightgown 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.) (Burton, 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 supportive effect on a

girl like Alice. The scene presents fear not as a gender-based weakness but as a human response that Alice learns to confront it by herself with her father's encouragement. What is notable about Charles Kingsley's attitude towards 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 point to be signified in the movie is that Mr. Kingsley can be identified as a pioneering feminist figure due to his motivating and therapeutic approach to his daughter. The nineteenth century is also sexist in terms of diagnosing women with a psychological condition called "hysteria", some symptoms of which are emotional distress, nervous anxiety, irritability, and traumatic nightmares (Schiff, 2021, para. 1). Against this oppressive Victorian backdrop, the empathetic stance of Alice's father signals a radical departure from the prevailing patriarchal norms of his era. Rather than pathologizing Alice's nightmare as a symptom of a fragile, hysterical disposition that required isolation, medical intervention, or suppression, her father offers immediate emotional safety and validation. By approaching her distress with paternal warmth and functional support rather than clinical detachment or paternalistic condescension, he defies the nineteenth-century tendency to view female emotional expression as a pathology.

Another rigid and valued 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. (Burton, 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 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 (2018) 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" (p. 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. During the carriage ride, Alice directly challenges the bodily and sartorial constraints imposed on Victorian women. She even philosophically questions what "proper" is and compares wearing a corset to wearing a codfish. She views the corset, which is a physical instrument of female constriction, as absurd, questioning the arbitrary nature of societal dress codes. 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 a similar mentality with each other, and he would laugh at all this nonsense.

Another interesting detail about Alice's perspective on gender roles is the conversation between her and Hamish, who is arranged to be her husband. Considering to be understood by him, she feels like sharing what she dreams about and as they are dancing quadrille at 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. (Burton, 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, as Alice does. It seems that it is nonsense or even unacceptable to imagine that men and women are exchanging their outfits in an 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 lacking in women. Unfortunately, women are thought not only to lack independent thinking, but also in other areas as well. Burki also explains how science and the church defined 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 (1975, p.197). Although these assumptions were prevalent in the nineteenth century, they were not correct at all when considering all the burdens and 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 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 advice. He first asks Alice who she is, and Alice simply tells him 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 in hand. The vorpal blade went snicker-snack. He left it dead, and with its head...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. (Burton, 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 noteworthy topic with this young Alice. He stresses the importance of Alice's search for her identity in both worlds: England of the nineteenth century and Wonderland. Ismajloska (2014), 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" (p. 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? With her life at stake, Alice uses her own willpower and her freedom to choose what to do for Wonderland. By choosing to slay the Jabberwocky, she both leads Wonderland to its salvation and gains her identity and her strength to make the right decision for herself.

Although Alice wins the battle in the realm of Wonderland, this time, she has another battle to win in the realm of 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 because he is not the right man. Next, she gently holds her sister Margaret's hand and tells her how much she loves her and that 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 very fond of white rabbits in a sarcastic way. As for her mother, she consoles her by promising 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 the 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 as 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cinematic adaptations of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* serve as vital cultural barometers, tracing the evolving socio-cultural landscape of female agency from the mid-twentieth century to the contemporary era. Through a comparative feminist and symbolic analysis, this study demonstrates how Walt Disney (1951) and Tim Burton (2010) recontextualize Carroll's heroine to reflect distinct gender paradigms. Disney's Alice subverts Victorian societal rigidity through quiet intellectual resistance, curiosity, and verbal autonomy; however, her subversion into the society remains contained within domestic and childhood boundaries. Conversely, Burton's 2010 adaptation transforms Alice into an overt feminist protagonist who reclaims her "muchness" by rejecting institutionalized marriage, discarding restrictive sartorial constraints like the corset, and diving into a heroic role of a dragon-slaying knight. Through rich visual symbolism that ranges from the oppressive domestic gardens of Victorian England to the liberatory battlefields of Underland, Burton elevates Alice from a conformist female member of the Victorian era to an autonomous, gallant woman who actively shapes her own destiny, culminating in her entry into global mercantilism and independence. Ultimately, both film works validate the enduring malleability of Carroll's text, illustrating how literary adaptation functions not merely as aesthetic repetition but as a dynamic space where shifting notions of female autonomy, identity, and social empowerment are continually renegotiated.

Conflict of Interest: The author reported no conflict of interest.

Data Availability: All data are included in the content of the paper.

Funding Statement: The author did not obtain any funding for this research.

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