

[The Fantastic and the Feminine Sublime of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*]

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[Abstract] *The study presents a close analysis of the immersive yet disorienting textual space of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland in order to explore its sublime aesthetics. As a piece of portal fantasy, the work enables readers to enter into the transcendent sphere of uncontrolled imagination via the adventures of the prophetic Dream Child, eliciting what David Sandner has defined as both a reformulation and an extension of the Romantic sublime: the fantastic sublime. A more favourable attitude towards the elusiveness of meaning in the text lies in Barbara Claire Freeman's feminine sublime, which prefers the excessive and unrepresentable to exclusion and control.*

[Keywords] *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland; Lewis Carroll; sublime; Romanticism; Romantic sublime; fantasy; imagination; children's literature; feminine sublime; feminist criticism*

[1] Introduction

The aesthetic category of the sublime has never ceased to attract interdisciplinary academic attention regardless of the innumerable judgements passed on its flawed formulation, which have dismissed the concept as overly vague, outdated (Brady 1), or outright impossible (Forsey 385). Despite this intense scrutiny, one may nevertheless detect a relatively neglected area of research: the sublime moment in children's literature. However, it would be misguided to proceed without mentioning Kamila Vránková's studies on the subject, included in the comprehensive monograph *Metamorphoses of the Sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Anglo-American Children's Literature* (2019). Perhaps the realization that one deals with unthinkable phenomena each day in the current pandemic situation will stimulate new approaches to the sublime incident.

This article aims to serve as a kind of Baedeker to Carroll's Wonderland realm of uncontrolled imagination and semiotic disarray, perceived as a potential locus of sublimity. The study's intention is twofold: firstly, it explores *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) as a portal fantasy (Mendlesohn), providing access to an underground world where a release from the constraints of signification becomes attainable. The feasibility of a glance past the conceivable may stir up the Kantian sublime, when "a discontinuity opens between what can be grasped and what is felt to be meaningful" (Weiskel 21). In this context, a re-examination of David Sandner's fantastic sublime is due. Drawing on Thomas Weiskel's text about the Romantic sublime, Sandner introduces a parallel between fantasy and a spiritual rebirth or conversion, embracing the possibility of a beyond which the imagination endeavours to reach with the assistance of a mediator, the Dream-Child (51). However, Weiskel himself adopts a sceptical stance towards Kantian metaphysics and seeks to "deidealize" the notion of sublimity – an idea which will be developed here in further detail with respect to Carroll's classic (28). Secondly, focusing on the work's status as nonsense literature, it is possible to state that Freeman's feminine sublime is likewise applicable here, and indeed perhaps more fitting. Freeman rejects the hostile treatment of excess and otherness, framed as factors hindering sublimity, and advocates a more accepting, unprejudiced attitude towards these qualities.

The first part of this paper surveys the critical history of the sublime and its most prominent theorists. It is followed by an appraisal of Sandner's fantastic sublime and the professed epitome of the Romantic Child. The exploration of the feminine sublime in the third part is followed by an attempt in the fourth part to juxtapose the two designs, concentrating on the recurrent theme of return.

[2] Theories of the Sublime in the Writings of Longinus, Burke and Kant

To comprehend the essence of the sublime, one might want to start the investigation with the etymology of the word. A careful dissection of the Latin word *sublimis* reveals the

parts “sub” and “limen”, denoting “up to” and “top piece of a door” respectively (Shaw 1). Consulting an etymological dictionary, one is likely to discover a link between the various definitions of the concept offered by theorists and the 16th-century usage, referring to style or language which is “lofty, exalted” (“Sublime” 469). However arduous a task it may seem to summarize the numerous approaches to sublimity in one statement, Thomas Weiskel has succeeded in elucidating the phenomenon concisely. He contends that the sublime is, at its most basic level, a step across the threshold of the limiting human condition and hence its transcendence, a rising towards the unreachable (3). What immediately becomes apparent is how definitions resort to similar imagery to depict the effects of the sublime: that of elevation, passing through a door, or pulling aside a curtain, just like Alice does in John Tenniel’s much-loved illustration. Although obscurity is ostensibly a common denominator of most definitions, there are also other adjectives frequently associated with sublime objects, such as grandiose, majestic, awe-inspiring, and impressive.

The conveniently entitled *On the Sublime* (Latin *Peri Hypsous*) is regarded as the earliest piece of critical writing dealing with the subject; though of uncertain authorship, the work is traditionally ascribed to Longinus, a Greek rhetorician (Shaw 12). The treatise had remained largely overlooked until Nicolas Boileau’s 1674 French translation, which is responsible for the considerable influence the text exerted over subsequent theories of the sublime (Doran 29). Significantly, the idea of achieving a state of propinquity to the divine as a result of a rapturous event originates from Longinus’s discussion (Doran 40). *Hypsous* emanates from excellence in eloquence, and it is most forcefully evoked by the exhibition of “genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of ‘fine madness’ and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of god” (Longinus 14–15). The reader or orator of a sublime piece drifts into an ecstatic condition, surpassing the confines of selfhood by the unification with the writer/speaker and the text itself, experiencing awe and amazement (Doran 44). In depicting the occurrence of sublimity as a moment of “fine madness”, accompanied by a mood of exaltation and the temporary loss of self, Longinus echoes Philo’s view of ecstasy, “the soul’s temporary possession by God” (44).

Examples of sublime literature are presented by Longinus in order to give guidance to those who may choose to cultivate their style of expression; additionally, a collection of rhetorical devices is supplied for the same end. However, out of the five sources of the sublime, namely “grandeur of thought”, “power of moving the passions”, “figures of speech”, “graceful expression”, and “dignity and elevation of structure”, the first two are accredited to natural ability and not to *techné* (Longinus 12–13). Doran highlights the relation between Longinus’s reflection on the poetry of Sappho and the terror at the core of Edmund Burke’s sublime (74); a turmoil of contradictory emotions is generated as “she freezes, she burns, she raves, she reasons, and all at the same instant” (Longinus 23).

Edmund Burke’s chief concern in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was not with the prowess of the producers of sublime texts so much as with the profound emotional response of their readers/spectators. As Burke famously writes, the sublime may be elicited by “whatever is fitted in any sort to

excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible” (36). A seemingly conflicting statement follows after merely a few pages: “Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime” (47). Indeed, when the terrible and dangerous scene unfolds at a safe distance from the beholder, the most intense feeling of dread is aroused, yet the individual exults in the prospect of “self-preservation” (47). Such apprehension of the sublime incident’s mechanics is particularly pertinent to the analysis of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, since nonsense could be viewed as a “flirtation with the limits of sense-making”, where a potential disintegration of sense is both terrifying and delightful (Shires 267). The text is coquettish and blissful, yet the shadow of crisis in meaning and identity crouches over unsuspecting readers. In this case, the pleasure may be attributable to the readers’ protected position, the outcome of their withdrawal from the disruption that arises.

What the intellect can gain solely from mental impressions and not empirical knowledge is found truly sublime by Burke (Shaw 51). Only conceptually grasped are entities akin to “God, angels, devils, heaven and hell” (Burke 158). Power exceeding ours is sublime owing to its intimidating nature; confronted with the omnipotence of God, we have no choice but to “rejoice with trembling” (Burke 63). Another vital source of the sublime is obscurity, fuelled by the incogitability of darkness and unearthly creatures like ghosts and goblins (54). Additionally, criticism revolving around the sensation of horror issuing from a discerned supernatural presence and nightmarish atmosphere in Gothic fiction is rooted in Burke’s foundational text (Mishra 71).

With Immanuel Kant, a change occurred in the theorization of the sublime on two fronts. Firstly, Kant set out to assess the moral implications of the rapturous experience. Secondly, and most importantly, there appears to be a movement from the evaluation of the sublime as an intrinsic quality of the object to its presentation in the mind (Kant 86). Seeking to accommodate the opposing views of rationalist and empirical philosophers in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant specifies how “one can have no *knowledge* of supersensible (noumenal) entities or ideas (God, freedom, immortality), though we can still *think* them in logically suitable ways” (Doran 185). Initially, the faculty of imagination may be compelled to admit defeat as the world above the senses is unfathomable; nevertheless, these entities undergo a negative presentation in the mind, and thus reason triumphs (Kant 104). The supremacy of the faculty of reason causes the imagination to feel unbound and capable of conceiving of infinitude and shapelessness in reasonable terms. Subsequent to the distress brought about by the insufficiency of imagination, there is comfort in the recognition of our aptitude for comprehension via rationality, resulting in a flux of emotions (78). Kant argues that infinity and other concepts which are “great beyond all comparison even with the faculty of mathematical estimation” could inspire the mathematical sublime (86), while the dynamical sublime may be enkindled by startling natural phenomena, reflecting the “might” of nature (90). The unknowable dreamscape of *Wonderland* and the apparently unlimited fluctuation of meaning may be appropriate illustrations of encounters with the mathematical sublime, as will be postulated in the following parts of this paper.

[3] The Fantastic Sublime

Positioning nineteenth-century children's literature against the backdrop of the lingering Romantic sentiments in that era, Sandner identifies a fantastic sublime awakened by the creative power of language (59). Most salient is fantasy's relative independence from the sensory world, whereas the Romantic sublime requires Nature as a springboard for elevation to the spiritual realm. Fantasy, on the other hand, relies upon the "daring performance of words" forming imaginary spheres (62). It must be mentioned that the pivotal role of imagination and loss of identity are characteristic of both models. Sandner observes how the Romantic Child, the "mighty prophet" in Wordsworth's words ("Ode: Intimations of Immortality" line 114) or the "dream-child" in Carroll's (4), assumes the role of a visionary guide back to childhood innocence and boundless imagination instead of being subject to indoctrination and moralizing (Sandner 8). He describes the way in which "nineteenth-century children's fantasy literature, presided over by the divine child, moves outward on a visionary journey and return, on a quest toward the transcendent and spiritual" (55). Of course, the problematic aspects of the constructed Romantic Child should not go unremarked.

Carroll's novel is undoubtedly imbued by Romantic qualities, "the triumph of the values of imaginative spontaneity, visionary originality, wonder, and emotional self-expression" ("Romanticism" 872). Sandner himself stresses the marked effect that the rediscovery of folklore and cultural tradition had on writing for children in the period, paying special attention to the prominence of fairy tales (5). The primacy of imagination in the epoch is underpinned by a shift, reformulating the Lockean "tabula rasa" attitude to the mind; rather than assigning a passive role to the mind in the process of experiencing the sensible world, Romantic thought champions active involvement and even contribution (Abrams 57). Fancy or imagination is found to be able to illuminate the existence of a "profounder, spiritual reality transcending nature, time, and space", showing a connection between "the individual mind and the mind of the absolute" or the divine mind (Day 58–59). What a sublime work of art can accomplish, according to Schelling, is to lift the curtain between the sensible world and this spiritual domain, allowing for a narrow aperture through which one can glimpse something. To use a rather apt metaphor, the situation bears a resemblance to the opening of a little door, similarly hidden behind a curtain, to find the most enchanting garden on the other side, which ultimately cannot be reached. Schelling continues to explain how "the land of phantasy toward which we aspire gleams through the world of sense only as through a half-transparent mist, only *as meaning does through words*" (qtd. in Shaw 91, emphasis added).

The central part of Sandner's project is the reappraisal of the Romantic sublime vis-à-vis Victorian children's fiction. Words constructing fantastic worlds supplement the natural setting of mountains, riverbanks, gardens, or forests as catalysts for the sublime, retaining the theme of gesturing towards supernatural spheres available exclusively through them (56–57). Sandner considers Weiskel's acclaimed *Romantic Sublime* (1976) a key text for his theory. For Weiskel, the sublime is "the moment when the relation

between the signifier and signified breaks down and is replaced by an indeterminate relationship” (qtd. in Sandner 51), thus enacting the trials of signification themselves (Weiskel 26). The fanciful creatures residing in Wonderland and their bizarre customs surely have a destabilizing effect on Alice and the reader alike; an additional layer to the analysis suggested by this essay is to explore the correlation between the disintegration of meaning in nonsense literature and Weiskel’s framework.

One revealing observation may be that Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole coincides with three states of the sublime as proposed by Weiskel. During the first phase, the mind merely contemplates the given object, sustaining a neutral relationship with it (26). Initially, Alice is not perplexed by the sight of the White Rabbit, her first encounter with the inexplicability of Wonderland, hence the undisturbed link between signifier and signified:

There was nothing so *very* remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so *very* much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!’ (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural). (Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures* 6)

In the second phase, the sublime is blocked due to the ambiguity and instability of meaning, “excess on the plane of either the signifier or the signified” (Weiskel 26). If the signifiers are in excess, the source of the breakdown reveals itself to be that of the Kantian mathematical sublime, outlining imagination’s inability to comprehend the object in its totality and so pushing to its limits. The signifiers “overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream” (26). On the other hand, signifieds may also be superfluous, in which case an inconceivable plenitude and overdetermination transpire, represented by the abyss (27).

It is crucial to note that both types of disruption characterize nonsense literature; Jean-Jacques Lecercle recognizes a semantic gap in nonsense works, where everything is simultaneously “entirely meaningless and infinitely meaningful” (67–68). Wandering through Wonderland, the circumstances that Alice faces become “curiouser and curiouser”, and sense gradually surrenders to fancy and whimsy (Carroll 13). Common sense, however, is never totally abandoned. Being self-reflexive, a “discourse about discoursing”, nonsense literature subverts the processes constituting sense-making (Stewart 88–89). Linda M. Shires touches on the roles of parody and the numerous misunderstandings Alice experienced with the inhabitants of Wonderland, as these instances precipitate a chasm between signifier and signified. Furthermore, they are seen as reminders of the arbitrariness of rules and language (273). The seemingly illogical etiquette is observed by the guests of the Mad Tea-Party without raising any objections; additionally, a riddle devoid of a solution is just as unsurprising as cards painting roses in a garden. The creatures’ complete unawareness of these ludicrous circumstances produces a humorous effect; during one of these misunderstandings, originating from the confusion of the homophonous pairs tail-tale and not-knot, the Mouse announces that it is Alice who

insults him by talking nonsense (Carroll 25). Because of the excess in signification and fluidity of meaning, nonsense here is a negative force, a barrier to sublimity.

Following Lacan, we could ponder whether this second state endangers one's sense of identity as it is constructed through signification, through language (Shires 273). The multiple occasions on which Alice's size changes in the novel grants her more than enough opportunities to entertain this very idea. She is addressed as Mary Ann (Carroll 27), a serpent (42), or mad (52). She is praised for "a clear way you have of putting things" (73), yet she is also called a simpleton (78). No wonder she has trouble identifying herself upon the Caterpillar's request:

"Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar.

[...] "I...I hardly know, sir, just at present... at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then."

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!"

"I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, sir" said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see".
(Carroll 35)

Alice takes the Caterpillar's words literally and attempts identification instead of elaborating on the meaning of her utterance. Her confusion of selfhood and the spoken words implies the abovementioned interconnectedness of the two. Unable to explain her *self*, Alice's identity is under threat, and her exchange with the Caterpillar would have regressed to the opening question infinitely had she not begun to interrogate the Caterpillar on the same matter.

The vanishing of the self is indispensable for the entrée into the world of fantasy in the second phase of the Romantic and fantastic sublime, because it gives rise to "a revelation of sudden remembrance, the dropping of an amnesia, the return of something lost" (Sandner 52). Self-loss engenders reconnection with the metaphysical world and the regaining of a childlike power of imagination. The yearned recapturing of the golden afternoons of youth from which one is alienated as a result of maturation is a sensation prevalent in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality". Wordsworth is nostalgic about childhood as a time when memories of our immortal souls' pre-existence have not yet wholly faded away. The uncontaminated Romantic Child, credited with visionary powers, is the one "On whom those truths do rest / Which we are toiling all our lives to find" (lines 115–116). Experienced adults keep hold of just fragments of the intuitions that children have in their innocence.

The third phase of Weiskel's sublime brings restoration, a reconciliation of mind and nature, a joyous unity of things (Sandner 57). The mind reconstitutes the relation between signifier and signified with the help of reason. Overcoming the anxiety provoked by opacity is consoling and uplifting, as it underscores the individual's mental competence. The novel closes with Alice's dismissal of the Queen of Hearts and her court as "nothing but a pack of cards" and with her return, perhaps as a consequence, to the familiar surroundings of the frame narrative and self-knowledge (Carroll 100). Alice manages to conceptualize what her imagination was unable to present in the form of a "curious

dream”, supporting the Kantian perspective on the superiority of rationality. Having established that Alice upholds her claims for explanation and meaning, it will now be worthwhile to reconsider her status as a Romantic Child.

[4] Alice: The Romantic or the Rational Child?

Conventionally, histories of children's literature are written in a way that emphasizes a shift from didactic pieces, informed by Enlightenment rationality, to the liberation of imagination, corresponding to the Romantic disposition. David Rudd, in contrast, warns readers that “such ‘grand narratives’ about the area's development are only that” (29). Nonetheless, it is easy to recognize in the Carrollian heroine the child reader of these texts and the recipient of education and initiation into society, complying with their principles. In order to find a fixed point of reference amidst the increasingly preposterous sequences of happenings, Alice turns to the poems that she was made to memorize, which preached at children. The air of condescension permeating the original compositions is substituted by disinterested witticisms in light-hearted parodies, hinting at the fact that the intended message did not reach the young audiences in the first place, and that they remembered merely the “hollow” rhymes. The best-known are the parodies of Isaac Watts' “Against Idleness and Mischief” from his *Divine Songs for Children* (1715) and Robert Southey's “The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them” (Carroll, “Annotated Alice”). An unmistakably Alice-like position is the clutching of hands behind the back, which appears multiple times in the illustrations of both Alice books, most memorably in the portrayal of Alice's meeting with the Cheshire Cat. Goodacre declares that this was the exact body language expected from children who had to demonstrate their knowledge of the material they acquired via rote-learning (qtd. in Carroll, *Annotated Alice*). The Watts parody “How doth the little crocodile...” is recited in a similar position; now the hands are crossed on her lap, “as if she were saying lessons” (Carroll, *Alice's Adventures* 16).

The option of not ageing ever again in Wonderland is alluring as long as it does not entail the continuation of obligatory lessons forever, even the idea of which Alice understandably despises. Trapped in the White Rabbit's house, Alice indulges in these musings, but she monitors and challenges her own implausible thoughts: “Oh, you foolish Alice!” she answered herself. ‘How can you learn lessons in here? Why, there's hardly room for you, and no room at all for any lesson-books!’” (Carroll 29). Alice's struggles with her restriction by such regulations and societal expectations are clearly visible throughout the story, as Shires also points out (272). Running away to pursue the enigmatic White Rabbit with “burning curiosity” is evidently a transgressive act, yet she consistently applies the guidelines and behavioural patterns she was compelled to learn, even in situations when they are plainly unsuitable. At one point, she rebukes herself just like an adult would scold a child for taking some ideas way too far: “Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!” (13). Fundamentally, Alice lacks the purely rebellious spirit she is often given credit for, albeit she genuinely is inquisitive and daring.

The episodes of Alice's adventures fail to reinforce the instructions she received from the adults and their moral tales, the unstimulating books "without pictures or conversation" (6); instead, the codes of behaviour and values these works promote are undermined, and her already gained knowledge proves to be useless. Alice wishes to estimate the distance she fell and her precise location relying on the notions of latitude and longitude, and she is anxious to read the label on the bottle to avoid taking poison. She was taught to do so by the "little histories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts" because "they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them" (Carroll 11). The work is in a dialogic relationship with these "little histories", which spare no effort to lecture children on how to conduct themselves properly. The narrative voice both undercuts and parodies the authoritative tone employed in these texts; for instance, it informs the reader that Alice's knowledge of geographical coordinates is solely superficial, for she only remembers the words and nothing else of their function. The farcicality of Alice's insistence on remaining courteous and ladylike while falling down is accentuated as the readers are addressed thus: "...fancy curtsying as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?" (8). Moreover, Alice is worried that she will be judged and labelled an "ignorant little girl" if she puts a query to someone concerning her whereabouts, because she believes she should already know the answer. The figure of the Duchess tirelessly looking for morals in everything and finding only irrelevant and nonsensical ones is a mockery of the similar ambitions that adults writing for children may have (72).

Alice's experimentation with participation in eccentric games and conversations signals her increasing willingness to question categories accepted as indubitable; notwithstanding, she chooses to return to the safeguard of reasoning in order to avoid complete semiotic confusion and madness. She strives to utilize generally approved ways of reasoning under unlikely circumstances when they are in fact not welcome. Adherence to familiar conceptual classifications, and ignorance of the idiosyncratic logic at work in Wonderland, prevents her from playing and enjoying nonsense. Therefore, one could contest Sandner's description of the "sweet, unflappable" Alice as the perfect Romantic child (10), a "redeemer" of corrupted adults, the guardian or bearer of "sacred innocence and imagination of childhood" (6). Her reactions, and her oscillation between merriment emerging from meaninglessness and her demand for rules and reason, more closely mirrors the position of readers who are not quite ready for full assimilation into the nonsensical universe of Carroll.

[5] The Feminine Sublime

If excess is evaluated in less antagonistic terms, reason's necessary domination over the sublime object may be disputed. Barbara Claire Freeman states that theorists of the sublime are inclined to think of excess as the "blocking agent": frightening and, most importantly, feminine (22). She proclaims that the feminine sublime's major preoccupation is with reactions to what lies on the boundaries of language (3). Contrary to the

“masculinist sublime that seeks to master, appropriate, or colonize the other”, Freeman calls for a feminine sublime which adopts “a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness” and involves “receptivity and constant attention to that which makes meaning infinitely open and ungovernable” (11). Here, the feminine has mainly to do with a distrust of fixed structures and binary oppositions; more generally, the feminine sublime deals with what cannot be expressed in the sanctioned systems of thought (9–10). Once one can refrain from envisioning the sublime strictly as a manner of transgression, the boundaries themselves will become refutable (26). Reviewing the principal theoretical texts, Freeman arrives at the conclusion that authors use gendered language in their studies, and that they usually equate disorder and proliferation with the feminine by using metaphors traditionally associated with femininity.

One of the facets of *Peri Hypsous* that Freeman foregrounds in her discussion is Longinus' imprecise and reductive interpretation of Sappho's poetry. Rather than painting love by synthesizing its diverse elements and entrapping its intensity in the poem, Sappho desires to be consumed by these passions; in other words, she craves self-loss and does not try to escape the threatening event (19). A popular symbol for the sublime in critical writing is the paralyzing immensity of the sea or ocean, typically deemed to be female (23). Burke, for example, applauds its effectiveness in conjuring up amazement and disquietude because of its endless expansion on the horizon (53–54). An inquiry into Weiskel's influential schema uncovers that he is far from being innocent of the same charges. Weiskel views Kant through the lens of psychoanalysis and dramatizes the way in which the sublime shift from immeasurable to self-assertion with the aid of reason may be analogous to the transition from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal, taking the sublime “safely back home to the father” (25). The subjugation of feminine superfluity is hypothesized to be a requisite for the masculine affirmation of identity and the obtaining of culture.

Unlike the Romantic and fantastic sublime that encourages the overpowering of nonsense, Freeman's feminine sublime permits the concurrence of the otherwise incompatible lack of meaning and overabundance of meaning, thus cherishing the polysemic quality of Carroll's text. Excess and nonsense, then, does not block but rather sparks off the feminine sublime, which challenges the expected unification and fortification of the self in Weiskel's third phase. The appreciation of the infinitely playful land of wonders leads to the dissolution of self without any ensuing restoration. The evaporation of identity is seen in this case as a positive eventuality, since it fuses the self and the “other”, the excessive. In contrast to the remoteness from the terrible entity as put forward by Burke, the feminine sublime establishes a rapport between the subject and the object. What may inhibit the creation of this attachment is identical to what frustrates an engagement with the absurdity of Wonderland: the devotedness to a rigid system of rules and definite meanings, which children come to regard as the norm, having grown up on moral and cautionary tales.

Alice is, quite literally, nearly drowned by her emotions, something a “great girl” like her is normally not allowed to do (Carroll 13). Although she reproaches herself again, this time she remains unaffected by the internalized adult voice and loses control over her

sentiments. This outpouring or, rather, “overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth, “Preface” 508) facilitates her immersion in the nonsense fantasy world. At first, Alice is convinced that the situation in which she finds herself is nothing but a punishment for her oversensitivity, which she rightly deserves – though in fact, it is her flood of tears that creates the first opportunity for her to interact with the inhabitants of Wonderland. Boundaries are blurred between the self and other as Alice swims in her own tears next to the various animals. Alice’s reaction to a fictitious plea coming from above highlights the freeing fluidity of identity that is discernible underground: “Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I’ll come up; if not, I’ll stay down here till I’m somebody else” (Carroll 16).

Getting out of the pool, Alice realizes how naturally she can communicate with the birds and other beasts, “as if she had known them all her life” (20). The Caucus Race seals her bond with the Wonderland residents, in the course of which she decides to play along even though she can appreciate the absurdity of a competition in which everybody wins prizes (22). Whilst Alice’s hesitation is maintained until the end of her stay in Wonderland, there are occasions when the two contrasting mindsets, namely the support of reason on grounds of averting the fearful chaos and the readiness to join in the nonsense games, can coexist.

[6] A Common Motif: The Promise of Return

Noteworthy is the shared element of return that both the fantastic and the feminine sublime may bring forth. Embarking on a comparison of the distinct outlooks on the ravishing confrontation with otherness and meaning in profusion, one can ascertain key differences between the two paradigms. Given that the fantastic sublime culminates in a reinstatement of connections, the liberated self’s homecoming to the creative power of childhood can only be temporary. It is solely a flash of inspiration, which dies out as reality and logical thought plunges the individual back to the real world. The feminine sublime, by contrast, evades the recovery of such hierarchies, and in doing so enables a sort of return that may motivate a reassessment of how the structures of language and understanding operate. An investigation of the points at issue may also benefit from a brief examination of the status of the prospective readers.

From the breaking apart of a coherent self-image springs an ephemeral reconquering of childhood fancy, as has been discussed above. This stage of the sublime necessitates the unadulterated insight of the child, who is promoted to the rank of the mentor (Sandner 8). After little Alice departs from the riverbank to have tea in a presumably less hectic fashion than she did back in Wonderland, her older sister is slowly captivated by the same “wonderful dream” (Carroll 100). She is overjoyed by this state of sitting “with closed eyes” as she “half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality” (102). Parts of her daydream would fade into the components of the rural, Romantic landscape around her, evoking even Wordsworth’s “happy shepherd-boy” (“Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” line 35):

...the rattling of teacups would change to tinkling sheep-bells, and the Queen's shrill cries to the voice of the shepherd boy...and the sneeze of the baby, the shriek of the Gryphon, and all other queer noises, would change (she knew) to the confused clamour of the busy farm-yard. (Carroll, *Alice's Adventures* 102)

The sister believes that Alice will retain “the simple and loving heart of her childhood” even as a grown-up; through retelling her adventures to the next generations, she will recall “her own child-life, and the happy summer days” (102).

The anticipated sunny days are clouded by the somewhat controversial depiction of Alice as a Romantic or Dream-Child. Inasmuch as she persists in conforming to conventional modes of thinking, she cannot display the type of organic imagination celebrated by Romanticism. In addition, the inherent problems with constructing childhood from a hierarchically superior position as a time when innate gifts are possessed due to inexperience are unassailable. The justification behind Jacqueline Rose's attestation to the impossibility of children's literature stems from a trope of childhood that adults fabricate “for their own purposes (desires, in fact), as a site of plenitude to conceal the fractures that trouble us all: concerns over a lack of coherent subjectivity, over the instabilities of language and, ultimately, existence itself” (Rudd 30).

The most befitting reader of fantastic literature has been identified as one who is capable of “bringing longing and a shaping spirit of imagination” to the text (Sandner 57). To refer back to a previously employed analogy, only those who are prepared to take the passage and unlock the door that opens into the garden can locate the sublime in the magical tale. Anna Kérchy's ideal reader possesses kindred qualities; she insists that “intellectual pleasure is not all-prevailing, and is likely to be complemented, even predominated by a sheer pleasure of sounds, vocality, a transversal musicality, or a joy of imagination soaring into unknowns and impossibles” (“Ambiguous Alice” 116). The indefiniteness of meaning is conducive to a multitude of mimetic readings, many of which revolve around the sociohistorical and biographical dimensions of the novel. These interpretations, dependent on reasonable claims about the era of creation and the author, are judged to be inferior to a playful engagement with the text, centred on rhythm and associations. In Kérchy's proposition there may lie a preference for the feminine sublime, indicating a tendency to terminate the perpetual fixation on decoding the narrative and instead simply to relish it. The research carried out by *Contrariwise* scholars, and especially the seminal study *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild: The Myth and Reality of Lewis Carroll* (2015) by Karoline Leach, are testimonies to the fact that Dodgson's character may elude biographers just as easily as Snarks manage to escape from being caught throughout his oeuvre.

Kérchy posits that an openness to unbridled play and the mutable practices of signification could instigate an abandonment of the “disciplined, referential/denotative, phallogocentric symbolization fixated on making sense” (“Alice's Eroticized Adventures” 62). Inferred from her premise could be the feminine sublime's potentiality to foster a return to the pre-Symbolic linguistic playfulness of rhymes and unrestrained associations. The welcome release from the Lacanian Symbolic institution of language

achieved by virtue of nonsense empowers the individual to become conscious of the system's arbitrary nature.

Situated at the intersection of deconstructionism and feminist reader-response criticism is the issue of how women readers tackle male-written and male-centred texts. Drawing on the studies of numerous feminist researchers, Jonathan Culler recapitulates the fashion in which women readers are socialized into reading as men: identifying with a male point of view and favouring rationality (58). According to Culler, reading as a woman would incorporate an active criticism of phallogocentrism, "an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin" (61). In western epistemologies where the point of reference is unequivocally male, women occupy the subordinate part of hierarchies such as "self/other, presence/absence, law/chaos" (Jones 81). The patriarchal privileging of *logos* or presence makes the absence or disturbance of meaning alarming. Since Carroll's nonsense provides "linguistic/narrative zones of comfort and pleasure beyond the paranoid, restrictive, literal-minded patriarchal discourse" (Kérchy, "Alice's Eroticized Adventures" 70), the novel would harmonize with a feminine mode of reading.

Wonderland is also perceived as a place of "Julia Kristeva's blissful-bodily semiotic register that precedes symbolic language-acquisition and socializing Oedipalization's repressions" (Kérchy 62). The aftermath of Lacan's mirror-stage, the split between self and other, is the admission into the Symbolic order and hence to language and social conventions. The Symbolic is presided over by the Name-of-the-Father, ergo "the patronym, patriarchal law, patrilineal identity, language as our own inscription into patriarchy (qtd. in Furman 71). On the other hand, the pre-Symbolic/semiotic belongs to the feminine, the mother. Reading nonsense poetry and Alice's absurd adventures could yield a recuperation of this setting: "Instinctual sounds and rhythms which resist meaning stand in opposition to the symbolic order, and they unsettle and subvert the expected normative forms of discourse codified by our linguistic practices" (Furman 73). Yet the Symbolic could never be fully escaped; just as sense is essential for making nonsense, rules of grammar, syntax, and phonetics form the basis of the semantic game (Lecerclé 34). Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, resting on "infants' pre-oedipal fusion with their mothers, from the polymorphous bodily pleasures and the rhythmic play of mother-infant communication", competes with the Symbolic but can only give way to a partial flight from its oppressive order (Jones 86). The reciprocity between the two arrangements calls to mind the feminine sublime's propensity to attune discordant properties.

[7] Conclusion

The present study has sought to pinpoint the sublime aspects of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and examine its subversive undertones. After an overview of the relevant critical literature, the applicability and the limitations of Sandner's fantastic sublime were discussed with respect to Carroll's classic work. The centrality of the Romantic/Dream-Child to the Romantic and fantastic sublime was scrutinized, and the ills of this

constructed position were identified. By utilizing Thomas Weiskel's breakdown of the sublime occurrence, an effort was made to underline how nonsense literary works' challenge to and even deconstruction of the processes of signification could evoke a sense of menace and wonder.

While the abundance and ambiguity of meaning impede the "masculine" sublime, Barbara Claire Freeman's feminine sublime is more congruous with these intrinsic qualities of nonsense literature. Arguably, Carroll's book offers itself for analysis more readily via Freeman's framework, as the feminine sublime advocates the enhancement rather than the suppression of excess, the flux of signification and selfhood. The sublime dwells in the fantastic and nonsensical province of Wonderland, where the surplus of signifiers and signifieds urges the softening of borders and the marvelling of extremities. Stripped of all expendable protocols, language and identities are destabilized. Sandner's fantastic sublime offers interim freedom from the arrest of the imagination that is typical of adulthood, whereas Freeman's formative feminine sublime enables one to look at otherness in a different light and never to leave Wonderland behind entirely.

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