

Down the Rabbit Hole—To Die Will be an Awfully Big Adventure

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Death is a universal feature of human existence, yet our understanding of it is often confusing and fluid (Clark). For children, the concept of death could be perceived as something to fear or to make fun of and play with, depending on how they were introduced to and taught about it. One common source to increase one's understanding of it in the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, was books and stories. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* were very popular books during such times. Each showcased small elements of death in them, from which children could have indirectly picked up ideas about death. In this essay, I will be exploring how death is presented and behaved towards in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Peter and Wendy*, and relating the ideas brought up in the books to different components that, when incorporated correctly, could either flesh out or degrade a child's understanding of death.

When *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Peter and Wendy* (1911) were published, infant and child death rates were significantly higher than they are now; for this reason, along with a common thread of death, these books were chosen for analysis. In 1865, about one in every three children born in the United States, England, and Canada did not reach their fifth birthday, and in 1911, the rates dropped to about one in every five children (O'Neil, "United States"; "United Kingdom"; "Canada"). Therefore, it was common for siblings, neighbours, and peers to encounter death. Attending funerals for family members or friends was likely a regular part of their developmental world as they grew up (Baxter 36).

Some interesting cultural practices were performed in these periods, which served as a way for family members to cope with death and allowed children to learn how to behave around death. One such practice was to take pictures of deceased family members alongside living ones (Baxter 39). Pictures that were taken in 1865 often required subjects to stand completely still, perhaps with a hand resting on their dead sibling's cold shoulder, for two to five minutes. By 1911, exposure times had greatly decreased, but it was still somewhat common to take pictures with deceased family members. Another interesting cultural practice for children was dead doll play. Children

would simulate funerals and bury dolls, allowing them to play independently with practices and ideas about death (Baxter 44). In some instances, this was encouraged, as it was seen as a way to learn how to cope with death and behave appropriately in these situations. Others found it more gruesome and inappropriate for innocent children (qtd. in Baxter 44). Nevertheless, death was prevalent among everybody, and children had to learn how to behave towards death. Because of the amount of death a typical child would have experienced, adults were responsible for instructing their children about the subject. However, death is often treated as taboo, especially when children are present (Clark). Despite their parents' unintentional avoidance of the subject, children often expressed their feelings of death indirectly, usually through play, art, or conversation. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Peter and Wendy* would have been one of many sources where children would have indirectly learned about death. These are also examples of how some children could indirectly express their attitudes toward death. To better explore how these books may have done so, the meaning of 'understanding death' must be boiled down to a few key points.

Contemporary cognitive developmental psychologists have laboured diligently to specify and generalize components of understanding the concept of death among children (Clark). Researchers performed interviews or questionnaires with children, while others had children draw pictures or write stories and would then interpret them – in most instances, death came up spontaneously without being prompted (Speece & Brent). The three concepts throughout most of these studies are irreversibility, nonfunctionality, and universality. Irreversibility denotes that once someone has died, they cannot return to life; they are gone. Nonfunctionally means that a dead body cannot do whatever a living body can. Universality refers to the notion that, eventually, all living things die, including every person on earth, and that death can happen at any time. Research has concluded that at about three years old, death is understood to be a changed state across all cultures. However, religious, cultural, regional, and experiential factors all play a part in the developmental trajectory of a child's understanding after this age (Clark). These three components will be referred to throughout *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Peter and Wendy* as an operationalized way to measure how the books can benefit or harm a child's understanding of death.

Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a silly and illogical book. One never really knows what to expect on their first time reading through it, as nothing truly makes sense. This nonsense is also interwoven with death, which may have provided much-needed humour at the

time. Nevertheless, young children are very impressionable and might have missed the humour and taken something literally. When Alice falls down the rabbit hole for an unperceivable long time, she eventually hits the ground and springs to her feet to chase the rabbit as if nothing had happened. As she is falling, she mentions how people back home will see her as exceptionally brave for not being afraid of falling down the stairs or off the roof of a house (Carroll 4-5). Alice seems to carry a pleasant innocence toward death with her, as she is not in the least bit bothered about not dying after that very long fall and can see herself easily surviving a fall down some stairs or off the roof of a house, both of which could likely result in her death. When taken literally, this passage does not support the universality of death, as after experiencing these moments where Alice should have died, she did not. A child may have implicitly learned from this that death is not something one easily comes across, and to take this further, jumping off the house will not kill them. In my experience, watching soldiers jump out of airplanes with parachutes on TV inspired me to jump off our balcony with a plastic bag in the hope of achieving the same effect. Instead of gliding down gracefully, I twisted my ankle and cried with pain. Children could have been inspired similarly by Alice's experience here, which will unfortunately not yield the same results they hope to achieve.

Another example of death in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is after she falls down the rabbit hole and tries to get through the small door and into the garden. While doing so, she comes across a bottle labelled DRINK ME. Alice knows to look to see if it is marked poison or not. "She had never forgotten that, if you drink... from a bottle marked 'poison', it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later" (Carroll 6). Alice is certainly wise to look for a poison label, but she fails to realize that the bottle could kill her. She seems utterly innocent to this notion, as she just says that the bottle could disagree with you and not kill you. In accordance with the concept of universality, Alice is unaware of the possibility of the potion killing her; her innocence shields her from the possibility of death occurring without notice. It is possible that a child could take this to mean that they do not need to be so careful around certain dangerous things, like getting burned by a red hot poker or making yourself bleed with a knife, as Alice explained (6). It may be that, like the example of Alice falling earlier, it is not all that easy to die.

More examples of death in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are found in some poems throughout the book. One such poem in the book that addresses death is one that Alice unintentionally made up:

How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!
How cheerfully he seems to grin,
How neatly spreads his claws,
And welcomes little fishes in,
With gently smiling jaws! (Carroll 9)

This poem compares friendly imagery, like grinning and welcoming fish, with death. After messing up the poem she was trying to recite, Alice begins to cry because she is upset that the poem has changed and not because a creature is going to bring about the death of others. She then goes on to question why she cannot get the poem right, and one reason she comes up with is that she has become a different girl altogether. This could be the case, but I argue that the real reason she may have gotten confused with the words is that her recent encounter with death may have changed her. After all, falling all that distance with not so much as a scratch causes death to become nonsense, and her poem reflects that (Green 43-44). Perhaps a child having this read to them would unintentionally learn that death is not something to be feared, as Alice is entirely unbothered by the dying creatures in her incorrect reciting of the poem. However, it should be noted that this poem is a parody of a popular poem at the time called *How Doth the Little Busy Bee* by Isaac Watts, which children may have found amusing in and of itself that Alice could not get the words right.

Based on the few examples we have covered in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, we can easily conclude that this book harms a child's understanding of death rather than edifying it. Examples that convey similar messages are seen many more times throughout the book, from the various poem to the constant requests for beheadings (Carroll 40). One important thing to note is that although this book, when taken literally, can harm a child's conceptions about death, much of the death mentioned and alluded to in this book is surrounded by nonsense, humour, puns, and other means to make it more light-hearted (Green 43-44). I think that Carroll did this on purpose. One in every three children before the age of five was dying at the time of this book; he most likely treated death the way he did in his book as a way to take children's minds, as well as that of the parents, off of the topic. To bring it back to the three cognitive components of death, the book

never actually has anyone die in it, so irreversibility and nonfunctionality are never really addressed. Universality, as we had mentioned before, is made fun of several times, which provides much-needed humour about death at the time (43-44) but could also harm a child's understanding of death if taken literally.

Peter and Wendy also has a consistent thread of death throughout the book, though it is less nonsensical and abstract and more concrete and real. A significant example of this is after Peter and the lost boy's encounter with Hook and the pirates on Marooners Rock (Barrie 54). After Hook and the pirates leave with the crocodile in pursuit, the boys swim back to shore, expecting Peter and Wendy to arrive soon, and we find Peter and Wendy alone on Marooners Rock. Peter claims he cannot fly away, as Hook wounded him twice. However, in Barrie's original play notes, he wrote, "He believes it; he is so good at pretend that he feels the pain, his arms hang limp" (*Peter Pan*). Later, Peter is convinced that Wendy must be the one to escape using a kite that can only carry one of them, which would fly her away, leaving him alone on the rock to die. Again, in Barrie's original play notes, he wrote, "She knows very well that if it can lift her it can lift him also, for she has been told by the boys as a deadly secret that one of the queer things about him is that he is no weight at all. But it is a forbidden subject" (*Peter Pan*). After she leaves, Barrie's notes add more context to this situation, "Peter is afraid at last, and a tremor runs through him, like a shudder passing over the lagoon... with a drum beating in his breast as if he were a real boy at last." Peter then says, "to die will be an awfully big adventure" (*Peter Pan*). When considering Barrie's original play notes in this heroic section, it almost seems Peter wants to die (Robertson 53).

Peter's heart beating in fear of his mortality is what makes him a real boy. Just as little boys who play pretend and kill each other, only to rise back up seconds later, grow up to have a more sombre understanding of death when they are older, so too is Peter supposedly coming to this realization (Robertson 53). This is also later seen in the book when Peter realizes that Tinkerbell killed herself to save his life by drinking the poisoned medicine (Barrie 74), as his reaction is legitimate and does not appear to be a make-believe response to her death. This conveys that death is universal— that even Peter and Tinkerbell can die. It also implicitly teaches that death is irreversible and nonfunctional, indicated by the sadness and fear of someone losing a loved one. It reinforces what many children would have already likely seen before.

Another literal example of death in *Peter and Wendy* is near the end of the book with the big fight on Hook's ship (Barrie 80-86). Every time someone dies, Slightly counts how many have thus died. The names of those who died are not mentioned doing anything again in the story. This shows excellent irreversibility and nonfunctionality, as none of the dead pirates come back to life, nor can they do anything while dead. Captain Hook also serves as an excellent representation of these two points, as during his fight with Peter, he knows he is likely to lose. So, "[He fights] without hope. That passionate breast no longer asked for life; but for one boon it craved: to see Peter show bad form before it was cold forever" (85). I love this sentence, as it clearly and explicitly conveys that death is permanent. Captain Hook does not think he can try to get Peter to show bad form after he is gone, but he longs for it before he dies forever. Again, nonfunctionality and irreversibility are concepts that most children could easily learn from this encounter in the book.

Based on our analyses of both books, we can see that *Peter and Wendy* is a better source to teach children about death. At the same time, when taken literally, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is likely to confuse children. However, it was noted that Carroll's book was meant to be more of a way to alleviate much of the sadness about death, as it frequently couples death with humour. All in all, *Peter and Wendy* follows the cognitive concepts of death the best, which is beneficial to a child's understanding of it. This is especially true for children in the early 1900s when this book was published, as death was still a somewhat prevalent part of life, and children were curious (just as they are today) to learn anything they could about it. Parents who wish to show innocent yet meaningful examples of death to teach their kids about it indirectly should consider reading *Peter and Wendy* to them. Of the two books discussed, it is the most beneficial to a child's understanding of death.

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