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EDUCATING WONDER AWAY: CHARLES DICKENS’ AND LEWIS CARROLL’S ATTACK ON VICTORIAN EDUCATION

by

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Charles Dickens lived during a time when great change was occurring for both the lower and upper classes in Great Britain. The Industrial Revolution brought on new technologies that made it possible to mass-produce products of all kinds, effectively eliminating the need for great amounts of independent workers and farmers. Children’s education, too, was a controversial topic that underwent much consideration in Parliament, especially because many of the country’s children were working alongside the adults in the factories. Beginning in 1833, new legislation gave government-funded grants to schools and allowed children breaks during work hours specifically for their education, and that eventually led to the “reconstruction and expansion” in the Elementary Education Act of 1870 (Altick 157, Marcham 180). Dickens wrote *Hard Times* before the government fully funded public education in 1870, but he could already see how having an education based on the “figures and averages” that would get the school more funding from the government was slowly eliminating the need to nurture creativity (Dickens 284). As a political activist, he had plenty to say about the controversies regarding these reforms. Speaking for himself, Dickens affirmed he had “no fear of being misunderstood” because he always communicated exactly what he wanted to say (278). For him, the “powers and purposes of Fiction” were to “stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate or indignant feeling”—not confuse them (284). Author G.K. Chesterton said it best in his biography of Dickens: “…the Dickens novel was popular, not because it was an unreal world, but because it was a real world; a world in which the soul could live” (Chesterton 100). While his novel, *Hard Times*, does address the conditions of the working class, its most blatant attack is on the pragmatic education of both lower and middle class children. When reading *Hard Times*, it would be very difficult to ignore Dickens’ belief that “a nation without fancy…never did, never can, never will, hold a great place
under the sun,” which he visibly portrays using the fictitious members of Coketown and the Gradgrind family (Dickens 277).

The same cannot be said of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. A contemporary of Dickens, Carroll wrote *Wonderland* during the same political controversies. However, where Dickens’ realistic *Hard Times* is extremely direct in its critique of public education, Carroll’s *Wonderland* masks its criticisms under its nonsense genre—that is, a genre of literature that “capitalizes on” the disruption of sense (Parsons xviii). Filled with fantastic creatures and scenarios—in addition to the fact that Alice’s adventures turn out to be a mere dream—it is no surprise that an 1868 article in the *London Times* simply calls Carroll’s “little disputatious conversations and philosophic reflections...most droll.” While such a review might attract and entertain children, which was Carroll’s first priority, it does not suggest any kind of literary merit. However, Straley argues that “children’s fantasy...is an important place to look for the ways Victorian writers explored” what children “needed to learn,” placing value and importance on Carroll’s chosen genre. Townsend agrees that all of the Alice novels offer and interesting psychological insight into Alice’s perspective, and Auerbach confirms that Carroll’s novels “can tell the adult reader a great deal about the Victorian [child’s] mind” (315). Unlike Dickens, though, Lewis Carroll was not a political activist. Carroll was actually Charles Dodgson, a conservative clergyman who had not the luxury of maintaining extreme political leanings. Watson affirms that Dodgson was a “highly conservative Oxford don” who would have thought that “idealism...was silly at best and dangerous at worst” (543, 547). Nevertheless, both *Hard Times* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* seem to be concerned with the same issue: Victorian children are losing opportunities for curiosity and wonder at the hands of their educators. This article will investigate how reading Dickens’ realistic novel in conjunction with
Carroll’s nonsense novel provides a deeper insight into each author’s critique. Additionally, it seeks to explore how both novels advocate for Victorian-era children by exploiting the damaging flaws in the elementary education system and its educators. The reforms may have been seemingly well-intentioned; however, because of their implementation, Dickens and Carroll demonstrate how children were essentially educated out of their imagination and forced into a premature adulthood.

The need for public education in Victorian-era Britain arose with the Industrial Revolution, but it was also one solution for an upper class fearing for their traditions. Altick states that “the first aim of popular schooling was to wet down the smoldering embers of discontentment” that could ignite into destructive rebellion in Victorian Britain (141). In the 18th century, “Scottish Jacobites” rose against the English government in protest of the union between England and Scotland and attempted to gain control of the country (Szechi 53). Thus began the “Jacobin panic” that lasted into the 19th century, bringing renewed concern for making the lower classes “pillars of establishment” and maintaining traditional social structures (Altick 141, Wardle 22). While many conservatives worried an education for the lower classes would nurture political thought and encourage another rebellion, more liberal politicians argued that it would do just the opposite: if instructors could mold children into accepting their rightful place in society, England would be safe from a revolt (Altick 141). While both sides of Parliament disagreed on the implementation of such an education system, the majority of Whigs and Tories “favoured...any practicable measure of official educational action” (Johnson 97). In addition to the government, several religious and secular institutions formed educational agencies like the National Society and the Central Society for Education, testifying “to the intensity of interest” throughout the whole of England (97).
Like his countrymen, Dickens was not advocating to abolish the class system in his novels. Quite the contrary—*Oliver Twist* is perhaps his most poignant example indicating Dickens’ firm belief in the rights of social class. Despite being raised among commoners and thieves, Oliver remains incorruptible solely because he was born to a middle-class mother. No, Dickens did not doubt the intentions behind the education reforms; he merely disapproved of their implementation. In a letter to the government’s Secretary of Science and Art, Henry Cole, Dickens admits that Gradgrind has “reason and good intention in...all that he does—but...he overdoes it” (Dickens 283). Educators like Gradgrind were more interested in holistic efficiency than individual progress, and as a result, their schools tended to run quite similar to a factory. In *Hard Times*, Dickens “shows the absurdity” of treating education like a numbers game and “presents standardized education as an unsettling and even dangerous prospect, giving voice to widespread fears that schooling would forever alter the...childhood experience” (de Stasio 300, Gargano 13). Though a fully government-funded public education system was not in place when Dickens wrote about Gradgrind’s school, critics of *Hard Times* noted that his “protest” was “in anticipation of some change in the...education system” in which childhood creativity is killed in pursuit of greater efficiency (Sinnet 331). In order to expose the Victorian education system for what it could become, Dickens structures Gradgrind’s fictional classroom after an industrial factory. Moreover, he demonstrates how such a learning environment is detrimental to the creative and emotional well-being of his students, thereby stunting their success as independent individuals.

One of the early programs initiated in Victorian classrooms was the Lancaster-Bell monitorial system, which was similar in theory to the level of hierarchies enforced in an industrial factory. Both Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell invented a system in which a teacher
selects a few star students—the monitors—and instructs them to teach basic lessons to younger students, thus ensuring an efficient and high-functioning distribution of education (Altick 146). Because the instructor does not have to worry about teaching introductory lessons, he can then use his time more efficiently and move on to more advanced lessons. In his classroom, Gradgrind implies he has a similar system of hierarchy in the way he addresses his students. When he calls on Sissy Jupe to answer a question, he clearly does not recognize her and asks for her identification number—“Girl number twenty” (Dickens 10). As soon as she fails to correctly answer his question, Gradgrind addresses Bitzer by his given name rather this his number because he knows Bitzer will answer correctly. Here, Dickens emphasizes the difference between the two children just as Lancaster and Bell emphasized differences in their students. By delegating work and choosing those better equipped to handle vast amounts of information, Victorian educators like Gradgrind become “simply... foremen” who run their schools by efficiency (Altick 145). However, according to Dickens, children like Bitzer were not model citizens of society. In order to tell Sissy “how to answer” questions correctly in class, Bitzer “frighten[s]” Sissy with his “cruel faces” and chases her down the road (Dickens 31). He mocks her ignorance and terrorizes her because she is a “horse-rider” and needs to learn how to be a better person and a better student (31). In Bitzer’s mind, it is his duty to make sure Sissy knows her information at whatever cost. Dickens may not have wanted to abolish the class system, but his depiction of Bitzer proves he did not condone negative class discrimination, either. Here, Dickens stresses that because the monitors do not have the maturity or insight to understand that teaching is not the same as taunting, the implementation of the monitorial system produces tension rather than progress among the students.
If Victorian public education was similar to the factory system, it stands to reason that they needed to generate some kind of product. Gargano argues that “the children are themselves the products, each to be shaped collectively by the same lessons and rules” (25). In this case, however, teachers were not hoping for “outward conformity” but rather the “internalization of moral [and traditional] standards” for all of the children, thereby producing beings they could manipulate and control (Ploszajska 413). Gradgrind considers his students “little pitchers” just waiting to be filled with “fact,” which does not indicate any kind of emotional attachment or concern for their individual well-being (Dickens 10). The only important quality about the children is their ability to retain knowledge; their individual likes or dislikes do not matter. Sissy likes horses and flowers, but none of that is important to Mr. Gradgrind when gauging her worth if she cannot compute statistics or relay the definition of a horse (Dickens 10). As with any product that is defective in a factory, Sissy is dismissed when it is obvious that she cannot keep up with all of the students. The main rationalization for not taking into account individuality in public education was that “the concerns of a few should not be regarded as the predilections of the many” (“Social Darwinism” 83). Because the school’s funding came from the government, they would not receive monies for the next term if they did not have efficient and successful results. So, because there was a “practical objection” to Sissy Jupe being a student, she poses a threat to the school’s overall progress (Dickens 42). Here, Dickens demonstrates how Victorian elementary schools were not in the business of creating smart, intelligent members of society. They wanted to create children who accepted reality the way their educators taught them.

Dickens further shows that by drilling facts rather than fancies into their students, Victorian educators left no room to wonder about what would happen if they were magically in a different social class, thus ensuring the stability of societal norms. Before Joseph Lancaster
implemented his curriculum of mass education, he assured the public that he “had no intention of disturbing traditional social hierarchies,” and Gradgrind’s first words in *Hard Times* explains exactly how educators like Lancaster could accomplish their goal: “Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life” (Hogan 383, Dickens 9). By teaching children that facts—unchanging ideas—are the only important details to remember, they should theoretically take that knowledge into their adult lives as members of their respective classes. Moreover, Dickens likens Gradgrind to a “kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow [children]...out of the regions of childhood” (10).

Children can often be found dreaming about a future life different from reality, and that is exactly the kind of activity Gradgrind did not want his students to do. So he, like other Victorian educators, “conditioned and manipulated” students into accepting reality by fostering an environment where “Nature was as strongly bricked out as [childhood] killing airs and gases were bricked in” (Thompson 89, Dickens 65). Dickens creates Gradgrind’s school to represent the oppressive nature of facts on children and their ability to dream, demonstrating how education was taking away key characteristics of childhood.

Another effective way Victorian schools are similar to a factory life is their perspective on time. Quoting Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, Johnson states that “without ‘education,’ time ‘bestowed’ would be ‘wasted’ or ‘misused...spent in ignorant wonder,’” which implies that any kind of time not spent learning or working was impractical (Johnson 102, Shuttleworth 60). Educators insisted that time was a valuable asset and, if wasted, decreased a student’s value within the school system. Dickens uses Gradgrind and Bounderby to exemplify the Victorian view of time claiming their time is worth more than the time of lowerclassmen, like the circus people. Gradgrind and his fellow Victorian educators “are the kind of people who know the
value of time” because they “can make more money” of their time (35). According to Bounderby, even Sissy’s tears for her dead father are a “wanton waste of time,” and by prioritizing her pain over her logic, she gives further proof she does not belong in school (Dickens 42). Time must be a priority for all of the citizens of Coketown if they are going to be successful. Dickens asserts that “Time...work[s] away” in Coketown, which does not allow for any kind of emotions, fantasies, or dreams (90). Here, he personifies time to effectively portray the hold it has over the town and its schools. Gradgrind and his students are obligated to answer for their time used or misused, and in this way, they are no longer free to be creative individuals.

Understandably, Gradgrind is wary of any activity that will impede focus and diligence in his students’ education, and the most suspicious activity is reading or studying any kind of literature. Because reading fiction engages children in a world different from reality, it has the potential to dramatically affect their ability to learn and accept facts. As a result, Victorian educators did not want children to like books. Altick explains that, in most schools, teachers did not allow silent reading, and they only used textbooks for memorization (157). They made sure “the courses in English literature remained confined to rote material that the students...parroted back to the teachers” so students felt no need to pursue outside literature (162). Gradgrind believes that reading “idle storybooks” paves the way to creativity, and he has no such stories in his house (Dickens 25). He and other educators are under the impression that “unless [a student] ha[s] been encouraged, it is morally and physically impossible” that they could have “unmanageable thoughts” which are prone to “wonder,” so they inculcate their students with the disdain for the “wrong books” that produce an “idle imagination” (Dickens 57, 25). Especially since the only people in Coketown associated with literature are the circus people, Gradgrind believes reading literature only leads to a life of poverty and ridicule. If he eliminates all sources
of “destructive nonsense,” he can effectively “form the minds of [his students] upon Facts” and ensure they will lead successful lives (Dickens 52, 9).

While Gradgrind wants to claim that imagination and creativity developed in children can lead to destruction, Dickens uses Gradgrind’s family to show it is far more destructive in the hands of adults who have not cultivated their individual emotions and desires. Just as the Victorian classroom demonstrated “the nightmare...of automatons turning out new regiments of automatons on a mass production line,” Gradgrind’s teaching and parenting style “formed” his students, including his children, “on his own model” (Altick 146, Dickens 135). As such, Gradgrind teaches Louisa to “never wonder” and encourages her to marry Bounderby entirely because he “does not do himself the injustice of pretending to be anything fanciful, fantastic, or...sentimental” (97). As a result of this education, however, Louisa has an “air of jaded sullenness” about her, leaving her empty of any passionate emotion for fear of reprimand or shame (19). Having children without any distractions from emotions may seem an ideal result of Gradgrind’s educational curriculum, but Mrs. Gradgrind’s character illustrates the negative effects of such a childhood come adulthood. Upon hearing that Louisa and Thomas were watching the circus instead of participating in a more productive activity, Mrs. Gradgrind exclaims: “I wonder at you. I declare you’re enough to make one regret ever having had a family at all” (23). If ‘wonder’ is, as Barnard defines it, the “free creative imagination of men,” then Mrs. Gradgrind uses her imagination in a criticizing, almost threatening, manner (391). In order to rid herself of the frivolous entertainment she was taught to loathe, she creates an imaginary world where her own children—magnets for frivolity—do not exist. She is the perfect example of an automaton-like product of a Victorian education: “whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, [she] was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her”
Because she has been barraged by facts all her life and deprived of emotional connection, she does know how to recognize her hypocrisy. She uses the very quality she condemns against her children. Mrs. Gradgrind acts as a haunting portrayal of a Victorian-educated child who grew into a Victorian-educated adult. Dickens creates situations in which trained authority figures use imagination in the wrong way, thereby making it more difficult for children to use it correctly. Essentially, educators like Gradgrind are fulfilling their own prophecies. Children will never be able to use wonder for the betterment of society if the only examples are those of criticism and destruction.

It is clear that middle-class students like Thomas and Louisa, who have been indoctrinated by such practices, do suffer from their education. However, Dickens does not celebrate the success of pure creativity, either. Though the circus people are “deserving...of as much respect...of any class of people in the world,” they also have “remarkable gentleness and childishness,” which does not make them capable of standing up to authority figures and rising out of their poverty (Dickens 40). Mr. Sleary, the ringmaster, has “a voice...like the efforts of a broken old pair of bellows,” implying too much work has made him inefficient and useless in a respectable society (40). Sleary is exactly the kind of person Dickens typically defends, but considering popular education was a recent development in Victorian England, it is safe to assume Mr. Sleary has little formal education, if any at all. He did not learn how to be around people like Gradgrind, and he assumes letting Sissy have that education is best for her. However, because her childhood was filled with love and wonder, she recognizes when she “tries to learn too much” and agrees to leave her education (91). Without that exposure, though, she would not have the “plain faith in the truth and right” of her own childhood (227). To more fully believe in her own values, she needed to discount the values set upon her by her educators. It is because of
her “simple confidence” that she is able to confront James Harthouse, Louisa’s near-lover (227). Sissy effectively “look[s] over and beyond” his manipulations, and his charm has “no effect” on her—“fact or no fact” (227). Here, Dickens proves that students of Victorian education can combat their teachers’ attempts to mold their minds to facts and traditions, but they must first reject it themselves. Sissy is the only one who leads a happy and successful life at the end of *Hard Times*, and in this way, Dickens suggests her negative contact with fact allows her to confidently live with respect, wonder, and hope for a better future.

Dickens is clearly trying to make a statement about the real results of Victorian education. Gargano stresses that “Dickens positions his fictions as key texts in the defense of an imperiled view of...childhood under attack in an increasingly standardized society” by disputing the claim that logic and rational thought are what is best for children in the Victorian era (13). His satire is almost too blatant—the most important instructors are named “M’Choakumchild,” deliberately portraying an oppressive picture of Victorian education (Dickens 14). Some critics call Dickens’ story “overtly symbolic,” suggesting that the setting of the story provides an easy understanding of Dickens’ symbolism (Lodge 403). Interpreting this argument in a broader sense, as long as an environment or purpose has been defined for heavily symbolic literature, its meaning should be more clear. If we consider Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in the same light we view *Hard Times*, then Carroll’s whimsical characters similarly become overtly symbolic rather than simple nonsense. By reading Carroll the same way as Dickens, Carroll’s attack on Victorian education, though slightly different, becomes much more clear.

While *Hard Times* delivers a holistic view of a typical British town during the Industrial Revolution, Carroll uses *Wonderland* to give an in-depth analysis of only one child during one day. Dickens published *Hard Times* as a series in his weekly magazine, *Household Words*, which
was a publication costing a mere tuppence (a penny of Queen Victoria) in order to attract readers of all classes (Fitzgerald). It makes sense that he would provide a universal critique of Victorian education; being the liberal he was, Dickens wanted to give support to his readers by letting them know he recognized the adversity of more than just one class. *Hard Times* is famous for having “no character or pair of characters” that overshadow the rest, indicating Dickens acts “not [as] a ruminative essayist” but as a simple observer of hardship (Lodge 405-6). Carroll’s novel, however, was directly geared toward his peers in the upper and middle classes. Published nearly a decade after Dickens’ novel, Carroll had reason to provide a different perspective to a different audience. Because they were the population both Dickens and Carroll critiqued the most, Carroll gave them what they stereotypically avoided: a profound insight into the mind of a single child. By allowing his readers to view the thought processes of a child who could very well be their own, Carroll delivers a critique of education practices to the people most likely to change it. In this way, Carroll gives his readers no excuse to dismiss the problems in Victorian education both he and Dickens present with their novels, even if they are in different genres.

Just because Carroll uses the nonsense genre, though, does not mean his writing is necessarily unrealistic. Similar to how Dickens uses parts of his childhood experiences in London to write “real life material” in his most famous works, Carroll uses his experiences as Reverend Dodgson, who was connected with both academia and children, to frame his writing (Cohen). He was a “photographer of children” both in a literal and literary sense, which suggests he uses his novels to similarly portray his reality (Gray vii). Though each of Carroll’s characters are uniquely peculiar, and most of them cannot exist in reality, Day claims “the characters and places in Wonderland had a counterpart in Oxford,” and there is a “strong element of autobiography” in his novels (1). It is a well-known fact that Alice is based on Alice Liddel, the
daughter of the dean at Christ Church, who spent much of her time in Carroll’s company (Cohen). While he does not explicitly name any of his other characters, he does give every one very distinct human traits that coincide with traditional stereotypes. John Tenniel, the original illustrator, made no effort “to present [the characters] as animals,” and their capitalized names indicate some level of humanization (Lovell-Smith 6). Many believe Carroll even includes himself in the novels, using his infamous stammer—which dubbed him “Do-do-dodgson”—to connect himself to the Dodo in the Caucus Race (Kelly). Also, because Wonderland is Alice’s dream world, it makes sense that her educators would be frightening creatures rather than people. Auerbach claims “the dainty child carries the threatening kingdom of Wonderland within her,” hinting that Wonderland is reality as Alice’s subconscious understands it (315). Watson further argues “there are more ways than realism of describing reality,” and Carroll creates “traditional and highly non-realistic originals” to emulate real people and experiences, which arguably makes his novels just as realistic as Dickens’ novels (544).

One of the criticisms Carroll has with academics, evident in his Wonderland characters, is their inability to communicate with and teach their students. An 1869 Report of the Minister regarding public schools states that though they do not doubt the teachers’ work ethic and academic knowledge, “they do not prepare their lessons properly beforehand,” and “the absence...of success appears to arise more from misapplication of method” (“Report” 8). Many students did not improve because their teachers did not suitably teach the material to each individual. In much the same way, Alice’s encounter with the Caterpillar demonstrates its inability to effectively instruct Alice in a way she can understand. Though it immediately assumes a position of authority, which rationalizes its giving “advice” to Alice, the Caterpillar provides “short remarks” that only add to her “very confusing” day (Carroll 35). Alice tries to
put her situation “clearly,” but she mostly receives “puzzling question[s]” in response (35). The only time the Caterpillar does offer seemingly well-defined advice, Alice could interpret it in different ways. It tells Alice to “keep her temper,” which could obviously be a command for Alice to watch her emotions; however, considering Dodgson was a mathematician and “still understood ‘temper’ to mean…proportions,” the Caterpillar could also have been telling her to maintain her proportion as a way to solve her problem with changing sizes (Bayley 3). Dickens mentions a similar problem when he refers to the instructors at Gradgrind’s school, Mr. and Mrs. M’Choakumchild. Though they can answer “volumes of head-breaking questions,” they continue failing to successfully instruct children like Sissy (Dickens 15). “If [they] had only learnt a little less,” laments Dickens, “how infinitely better [they] might have taught” their students (15). No one is discounting the Caterpillar’s and the M’Choakumchild’s intelligence, but both Carroll and Dickens expose their difficulty with translating that knowledge to another person as Victorian educators.

Without a teacher who communicates well, it is understandable that Carroll portrays Alice as a typical Victorian-educated child who does not fully comprehend the information she takes in; she simply memorizes and regurgitates. When Alice attempts to repeat “How doth the little busy bee,” a popular school rhyme, she finds that the “words [do] not come the same as they used to do”; in fact, instead of a poem about the importance of industry and humility, Alice replaces the bee with a crocodile and recites a poem “about predation” (Carroll 16, Kelly). What concerns her, though, is not the vast difference in meaning between the two poems—it is that she did not repeat “the right words” (Carroll 16). Carroll points out multiple times that Alice has “no very clear notion” of any concept she learned in school aside from the words to recite about it, which is why she cannot understand the other characters in Wonderland when they try to instruct
her (18). Dickens, however, argues that Victorian educators would much rather an Alice than a Sissy. When Sissy learns of “National Prosperity,” she grasps the real results of the statistics much better than she grasps how to use them mathematically (Dickens 60). Dickens explains she is “extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected” with the event, suggesting Sissy cannot simply memorize; she must understand before she applies it to her memory (60). Because the government helped to fund the public schools at that time, Queen Victoria had commissioned Inspectors evaluate their progress, and most disdained the practice of the “merit grant” specifically because it only encouraged educators to require their students to memorize facts as a way of demonstrating their knowledge (Great Britain 327). As long as schools had concrete progress to report of Her Majesty’s Inspectors, they would receive more grant monies for their school. Inspector Matthew Arnold stated that a “system...of standardized examination” was “injurious to instruction” and “had a bad effect” on both the students and their instructors because it fostered an environment where the school’s profit was more important than real education for the students (327). Despite the Inspector’s evaluations, Altick confirms most schools did nothing to change their practices (157). So, because Sissy cannot learn to memorize for the sake of the school, Gradgrind helps her decide that both she and the school would be better off if she were no longer a student.

Both Dickens and Carroll use their characters to illustrate how class structures and hierarchies were a big part of the reason why educators did not try to improve their lessons; as head of the class, and at the top of the hierarchy, they can never be wrong. Because they have more experience—because they know more facts—they will always be superior in intellect and decision-making in the eyes of their peers and students. The Caterpillar insists that Alice’s attempt at a rhyme is “wrong from beginning to end,” yet emphasizes its inability to recognize
Alice’s important opinion by rejecting her criticism of its confusing advice (Carroll 40).

Comparably, the Mouse insists he is in some “position of authority” based on his higher education, but as soon as Alice questions him, he does “not notice [her] question” and continues with his line of thought (Carroll 20-21). Kelly claims the Mouse’s “self-respect and indignation arise from his education, which he is quick to lord over” Alice and the other characters as if it makes him better than they are. When Alice attempts to think and add to conversations, the Victorian characters only stress her ignorance and their superiority. Dickens shows similar qualities in his educators. Like the Duchess, who claims Alice has “a right” to reason and contribute to creating morals “as pigs have to fly,” Sissy’s educators insist her compassion and ideas about poverty statistics are “mistakes”:

“‘And he said, This schoolroom is an immense town, and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your remark on the proportion? And my remark was—for I couldn’t think of a better one—that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million. And that was wrong, too’”

(Carroll 70, Dickens 59-60).

Even though Sissy’s point of view is evidently morally superior, her education teaches her that instructors “know everything” regardless of the situation (59). Alice similarly feels “the most contradicted” she has ever felt when she is in Wonderland, causing her to doubt her intuition and intelligence (Carroll 40). Here, Carroll and Dickens present situations where children try to question their educators not because of impertinence but of differing insights, and each time their educators reject their ideas on the basis that teachers cannot learn from students.
After showing that Victorian educators believe they are the only effective kind of teacher, Carroll and Dickens use their “model pupil[s]” to further exploit the illogic behind the acclaimed monitorial system (Leavis 366). While the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are very eager to show Alice exactly how she is wrong, it is evident they do not know what they learned, either. Just as Alice mistook “Antipathies” to mean ‘Antipodes’ in the beginning of the novel, their replacing ‘reading’ with ‘reeling’ and ‘writing’ with “writhing” prove the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are typical Victorian students who do not comprehend what they are learning—despite their having the “best of educations” (Carroll 8, 74). The article, “The Psychology of Monitorial Instruction,” claims the monitor “will communicate to his companions better than a master” because he will be at the same learning “capacity” as his pupil (53-55). That logic would hold if the students were taught well, but considering the monitors are taught in the same poor way as the other children, it does not make sense that they would be able to learn any better than their supposed inferiors. Unlike Alice, who tries to learn and grow throughout the novel, the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle have nothing to show for their education. In reality, the Gryphon is a “lazy thing” who speaks in common vernacular, and the Mock Turtle is a “real turtle” who never amounted to any kind of success (Carroll 71-72). Dickens’ counterpart to the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, Bitzer, shares a similar fate. Though he undoubtedly proves himself able to follow directions and memorize definitions for his teachers as a student, he does not grow or progress from when he was a child. As an adult, he works for Bounderby as a “porter” who is as “light as in the days when he...defined a horse” (Dickens 114). Dickens draws a connection to Bitzer’s childhood because he has not changed since his school-boy days; his mind is as “closely regulated” as it was when he was in school (Dickens 116). By emphasizing how even the star students’ education does not turn children into model citizens, Dickens and Carroll call into
question the efficacy of Victorian public education. Dickens proves Bitzer as an example of a student who, with his education, can only “belong to” an organized institution with a high-level authority figure (Dickens 143). Likewise, Carroll uses his former-student characters to show what happens when a Victorian-educated student is forced to become independent from school: they flounder and eventually fail. In this way, Carroll and Dickens demonstrate that Victorian educators merely use the monitors as pawns to better the efficiency of the school, fully aware that they are not cultivating independent living or learning for any student. As far as the schoolmaster is concerned, the only result that matters is the amount of “error[s] [a monitor] is able to correct” (“Psychology” 53).

Despite educators failing to impart effective teaching methods to their monitors, though, Dickens and Carroll show that they have no trouble inculcating the same sense of superiority over younger students. When Alice meets the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle, they immediately speak to her as though they have “some kind of authority” over her and frequently remind her that she is a “simpleton” who knows nothing (Carroll 80, 74). Then, they continue to advise Alice and tell her to “hold [her] tongue” when she interrupts their oratories, which is reminiscent of older educators Alice encounters in Wonderland (Carroll 74). The way they “order” Alice about and make her “repeat lessons” causes her to exclaim: “I might as well be at school at once!” (Carroll 80). Just as Sissy fell victim to Bitzer’s ruthless corrections, so too does Alice fall prey to the pseudo-monitors’ persistent admonitions. While the characters that most clearly emulate adult Victorian educators tell Alice she is wrong, none do so often in so little time as the younger Gryphon and Mock Turtle. Their instruction causes Alice to be so ashamed of her ignorance that she wishes to “sink into the earth” until she is not “encouraged to ask any more questions,” effectively using Joseph Lancaster’s primary “psychology of punishment”: public
humiliation (Carroll 73-74, Hogan 412). Dickens, too, provides logical justification for Victorian-educated callousness when Bitzer attempts to bring in Tom to suffer for his crimes against the bank. When begging Bitzer to let Tom sail overseas, Gradgrind asks Bitzer if his heart is “accessible... to any compassionate influence,” and Bitzer simply replies: “It is accessible to Reason, sir... and nothing else” (Dickens 276-77). Here, Dickens shows how because these students are so indoctrinated by logic, they cannot have illogical or impractical empathy for their peers. In this way, Dickens and Carroll agree with McReynolds in that Victorian-educated students cannot appreciate “nonintellectual life” and therefore do as much as or more harm than their adult counterparts (McReynolds 7).

Aside from the obvious harm to children that comes from having a Victorian education, though, educators were more afraid of what would happen if they did not strictly regulate their students. The Jacobite rebellion instilled an almost irrational fear of commoners in upper-class Englishmen, and Gradgrind plainly admits that Sissy’s “connections made her not an objects for the school” and a threat to Louisa’s upbringing (Szechi 53, Dickens 39). Because she belongs to the circus, he fears her power to bring down his finely honed system, demonstrating his own irrational fear of those in the lower classes. In his mind, giving in to “vulgar curiosity” leads to the “advanced stage of degeneracy” that plagues the circus people and those ruled by their own passions (25, 43). In Wonderland, the King demonstrates a similar fear when he meets the Cheshire Cat for the first time. When the infamous Cheshire Cat appears in front of the King of Hearts for the first time, the King “doesn’t like the look of it,” signifying some kind of suspicion about the Cat’s character (Carroll 65). Then, once it proves itself to be “impertinent,” the King “gets behind Alice” as if he is afraid of it (65). By highlighting the King’s apparent fear of the unknown creature, Carroll reflects fear of the British upperclassmen that unregulated children
could turn into unregulated adults and disturb their social class system. Carroll’s Queen of Hearts appears to be the most respected authority figure and would therefore be akin to a Victorian educator; however, Carroll does not connect her character with the stereotypical traits of an educator. If anything, the Queen represents a child who “shouts” and goes “stamping about” to get her “fancy,” which is exactly the kind of child Victorian educators like Gradgrind want to prevent (64-65, 72). The Queen is so involved with her own wants that she no longer acts like a queen; she acts like a “savage,” illustrating the degeneracy Gradgrind dread (55). However, because the Queen is a member of royalty—not a commoner—Carroll implies that the perhaps the upperclassmen feared for the wrong class.

As a result of fearing the unknown and ungoverned, Victorian educators take the mediums of creative expression they abhor and turn them into vehicles for “the social mission of reconstructing human nature” (Gargano 21). While some books published for children advocated for their rights, like Charles Kingsley’s Water Babies, far more were published to help keep children in their place. Reed references several stories, such as Thomas Day’s Sanford and Merton, that are centered around the “concept of rehabilitation” for naughty children (99). These books portrayed “inherently wicked” children and taught them to “punish themselves” in order to become “good citizens” (103). Children like Alice—who is wary of the drink on the table outside of the Queen’s garden due to “several nice little stories” about other children getting “burnt” because “they would not remember simple rules”—are then learning acceptable behavior at home in addition to at school, all but ensuring their compliance with Victorian values (Carroll 10). Geer claims Victorians used “so-called moral and informational literature...to mold beliefs and behaviours by means of precept and direct example,” making children believe concepts such as self-punishment are their idea (7). Dickens and Carroll demonstrate their characters’
tendencies toward self-shaming, especially if they are children who believe they are making a mistake. Though Bitzer is a model student, he frequently “knuckles himself” when he recognizes he has done something wrong, and Sissy states she is “almost ashamed” of her results in school (Dickens 31, 60). In this way, Victorian educators essentially kill two birds with one stone: they dramatically decreased the risk of literature to the minds of their students, and they effectively reinforced their curriculum in a way that would stay with a child long-term.

Carroll goes so far as to suggest that because books and educators taught Alice to punish herself, they created a kind of split in her identity. Kelly submits Alice has a “spirit of duality” about her in that she often “talks to herself...[and] treats herself as both rival and confidant.” She is a “curious child” who is “fond of pretending to be two people,” and she has learned to play the part of a child with both fantasies and insecurities while simultaneously acting as the authority figure who moderates her juvenile passions (Carroll 12). One minute, Alice chases a rabbit down a hole to appease her curiosity, and the next she “scolds[s] herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes,” emphasizing the strength of each of those dispositions (12). Even when Alice simply muses to herself, like when she wishes she could “shut up like a telescope,” she cannot have a creative idea without her Victorian side insisting she does not know “how to begin” (10). In this way, Carroll shows how teaching children to regulate themselves effectively squanders their chance at imagining for imagination’s sake. Without prior knowledge to follow through with a creative idea, having them is a waste of time. Geer asserts that “Alice’s adventures...work to satisfy...the adult’s desire to dominate the children and the child’s desire to resist that domination,” and Alice embodies both those qualities (7). Carroll uses Alice’s disparate personalities to illustrate how teachers trained their students so they would not need constant supervision to follow the rules.
However, because Victorian-educated students rely so much on their educations, they begin to lose their own sense of individuality. Dickens already confirms that Victorian educators only see their students as statistics, but both he and Carroll show how educators’ perspectives eventually rub off onto their children. After months of failing school, Sissy considers that it “would be a fine thing” to trade places with Louisa—a girl who has a “starved imagination” and is not in the least “self-willed”—rather than remain herself (Dickens 59, 19). Here, Dickens implies that Victorian educations teach students to base their worth on their knowledge. In that moment, it does not matter that Sissy is “an affectionate, earnest, good young woman” with unique personality traits that are “serviceable” to society; because she is “below the mark,” she does not want to be Sissy any longer (Dickens 92, 91). Similarly, when Alice first enters Wonderland and cannot remember all of the rhymes she previously memorized, Carroll suggests she founds her actual identity on her intellect. She cannot recall all of the facts she should know, so she begins “thinking over all the children she [knows] that [are] of the same age...to see if she could have been changed for any of them” (Carroll 15). She decides she “can’t be Mabel, for [she] knows all sorts of things...and [Mabel] knows such a very little,” but when she still cannot repeat the rhymes, “her eyes fill with tears” as she concludes she “must be Mabel after all” (15-16). In her logical mind, the only explanation for her inability to remember is that must be a different child, who is not Alice, with inferior intelligence. Alice’s identity crisis eventually pervades all of her adventures in Wonderland, and when the Pigeon insists she is a “serpent” and not a “little girl,” Alice questions her identity not only as herself but also as a person (Carroll 41-42). Auerbach further asserts that the “mystery of her identity” only deepens as she explores Wonderland, indicating she is more confused about herself the longer she is exposed to Victorian-like educators (317). In this way, Carroll demonstrates how deep the connections are
to her education; without knowledge to validate her existence, she is at risk of losing her individuality altogether.

Similar to Sissy’s experience in confronting Harthouse and taking control of Tom’s future, it is only when Alice recognizes adult figures can be wrong that she stands up for herself and her identity. Alice is almost always second-guessing her thoughts based on the feedback from the Wonderland creatures, but upon entering the courtroom for the Knave of Hearts’ trial, Carroll shows how she can finally connect meaning with fact. Alice notices the jurors writing down exactly what they hear, regardless of whether or not the information is relevant, and considers that regurgitating rather than deciphering observations will “muddle their slates” and serve no purpose in the trial (Carroll 84). By noticing the folly in rote memorization, which is a practice she follows earlier in the novel, Alice gives herself the ability to note other mistakes authority figures can make. As the White Rabbit reads the new poem, and the King proclaims it to be “the most important piece of evidence” of the trial, Alice immediately sees there is not “an atom of meaning in it” (93). Here, Alice not only demonstrates her own burgeoning powers of comprehension but also exposes the King’s failure to use his. Additionally, when the King attempts to enforce a rule he creates specifically to make Alice leave the courtroom, she exclaims she “shan’t go,” and then contests the King’s authority by explaining he “invented [the rule] just now” to suit his own convenience (91). Here, Carroll demonstrates that because Alice has the freedom to decide to interpret information herself, she also has the capacity to critique others’ interpretations, regardless of their social status. The King cannot argue his way out of Alice’s logic, turning “pale” and changing the topic of conversation, suggesting Alice’s apparent intellectual superiority over him (91). By exhibiting her newfound independence, Alice can move past her insecurities and acknowledge her own ability to decide her fate.
Though Alice’s experiences do reflect true characteristics of the Victorian public education system, Carroll frames the story with her reality, which suggests that Alice’s dream world in the only place where she can fully explore her desire for individuality. Immediately after she escapes Wonderland and returns to her life and sister, she speaks of her “curious dream” and, though she cannot “remember all of it,” she considers it was a “wonderful dream” (Carroll 96). Here, Carroll could be implying that because Alice seems to associate positive emotions with dreams, she has forgotten the fear and pain she went through during her interactions with the creatures in Wonderland. However, by using ‘wonderful’ to describe her adventures in ‘Wonderland,’ it seems more likely that Alice recalls her ability to utilize her imagination and independence and reflects on how she can apply those skills in her own life as a Victorian child. Geer argues that the differences between Alice’s dream world and reality “work to undermine such hopes and suggestions” by providing a clear distinction between the two worlds (2). Just as Alice cannot remember the rhymes and lessons of her real schoolroom in Wonderland, so too does she lose her freedom to think creatively as an individual when she leaves. Rackin argues that “Carroll’s naïve child-heroine” recognizes her “transcendent visions” as “necessary to make human existence possible,” and there is no indication that Alice can find that same confidence in her abilities as a unique individual anywhere in her reality (330). In fact, the existence of Carroll’s other Alice novel proves that she must enter some kind of nonsense world in order to continue exploring her childhood imagination.

Even when Alice does utilize her dream world to find her self-confidence and independence, she eventually abandons the traits that characterize her as a child. At the beginning of her adventures, Alice is more than ready to accept the nonsense going on around her as reality. When she first spots the White Rabbit, Alice demonstrates a childlike imagination
malleable enough to adapt to an alternate world; Carroll notes that “she ought to have wondered at this, but at the same time, it all seemed quite natural” (Carroll 7). Then, “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again,” Alice jumps down the rabbit hole and “wonder[s] what will happen next” (8). Regardless of the Victorian-educated part of her, on some level she still does not worry about the future or what will happen to her—in that moment, she only cares about her “burning...curiosity” (8). According to the Cheshire Cat, she must be “mad” like the rest of them, or “she wouldn’t have come” to Wonderland (49). However, as she argues with its many Victorian-like creatures, she begins to lose patience with nonsensical ideas. After the Mad Hatter gives her an unsatisfactory answer to the famous riddle, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”, Alice sighs “wearily” and tells him he “might do something better with the time...than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers” (54). Carroll indicates Alice is growing tired of the confusion and wishes for a more orderly environment. Similarly, when the Duchess’ baby begins to act like a pig, she initially rejects its ability to turn into anything unusual: “If you’re going to turn into a pig, my dear, I’ll have nothing to do with you!” (48). Where she did not doubt odd occurrences earlier in her explorations, she loses her flexibility to appreciate imagination as more creatures like the Mouse and the Mock Turtle criticize her “uncommon nonsense” (81). Kincaid claims Alice’s readers most fear “adulthood” destroying the unique sense of childhood about her, but she inevitably becomes a “well-ordered adult” who insists on creating “order in a world full of madness and disorder” (334, Rackin 329, Rother 90). It is when she eventually exposes the Jack of Knaves’ trial to be “stuff and nonsense” that she loses her ability to imagine altogether. As Alice unexpectedly grows at a rapid rate before she defies the King in the trial, Kelly argues that “her conviction that the cards’ entreaties are nonsense” makes her “[grow] up on her own.” Ultimately, Alice identifies her oppressors as
“nothing but a pack of cards” and finally leaves Wonderland, implying she would rather real educators than her own imagined ones (Carroll 95).

Carroll’s Alice acts a direct contrast to Dickens’ Sissy who, despite similar experiences in the classroom, retains her “heart of infancy” and ultimately uses her “imaginative graces” to “beautify lives...of reality” (Dickens 287). Instead of “suppressing the reality of her own true dream-visions,” like Alice does by rejecting her creations in Wonderland, Sissy agrees with Gradgrind that her presence in a Victorian classroom “any longer would be useless” and promptly ends her classic education (Rackin 328). While Gubar claims that “one of the...ideas Alice resists most vehemently...is the message that she should remain a child forever,” Sissy remains “child-like” through the whole of her life (338, Dickens 224). Yet, both Alice and Sissy discover a “fearlessness” to defy authoritarian figures in their lives, emphasizing Carroll’s crucial critique of Dickens’ unrealistic elements (224). In order for Alice to become an independent individual and uncover the faults of her Victorian educators, she needs to let go of her inclination to “fancy” and logically recognize her instructors as unsuitable (Carroll 11). Though Sissy may reasonably continue as “serviceable in the family,” it does not make sense that she should be able to best Harthouse and fight so vehemently against her oppressors without losing her childlike demeanor (Dickens 92).

Dickens may believe all Victorian childhood is under attack, but the way Alice, a member of the middle class, rejects her dreams suggests Carroll sees a major difference between Alice’s and Sissy’s separate childhoods: social class. Sissy demonstrates how she can effectively separate herself from her oppressive education and remain happy, but the middle class children—Louisa, Tom, and Bitzer—eventually lead somewhat unhappy adult lives. Toker argues that though “regimentation and uniformity are features of the industrial cityscape,”
Gradgrind's efforts to create a uniform "Utopian" society for the people of Coketown actually creates "dystopian threats to the discreteness of an individual identity" for his own children (472). Instead of focusing on how education affects all children, Carroll's arguments suggest Dickens was actually aiming his defense specifically at middle class children. Because Alice effectively loses her childlike demeanor during her Wonderland adventures, she is much more like Louisa, who similarly never recovers from her encounter with Victorian educators. By going to school, the imaginations of Gradgrind's middle-class students were educated out of them, giving them less happiness in their adult lives. Though Carroll obscured his political opinions by utilizing the nonsense genre, his critique reveals that he and Dickens had the same purpose in their writing. Together, they assert that though liberal, middle-class activists pushed for education reform, their system was actually the most destructive on the minds of their own children.
Works Cited


