# Love As Nonsense | 42 Seconds of Cynicism

By Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti

*In the following articles, Sherry L. Ackerman and Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti have collaborated in point and counter-point regarding Lewis Carroll's perspectives on Love. The articles represent a kind of dialectic that Lewis Carroll himself would have, undoubtedly, enjoyed. Good naturedly providing two distinctively different, yet interactive, interpretations of Carroll's views on love, Ackerman and Ranson-Polizzotti throw open the door for questioning certain aspects of Carroll's life that have, hitherto, been inconclusively addressed.*

*Ackerman, author of* Behind the Looking Glass *and Ranson-Polizzoti, author of* A Bath, Bedside, & Armchair Companion to Lewis Carroll *are currently collaborating on a Carrollian work-in-progress which examines the links between epilepsy and mysticism.*

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In 1856, Lewis Carroll tipped his hand concerning his rather satirical views about love in a piece that appeared in the *Train* entitled "Novelty and Romancement".

In "Novelty and Romancement," a man by the name of Stubbs, "a young lover in love with love itself" (31, soaring with the Dodo Rackin) is walking down the street one day sees a sign in a shop-window that reads, "Simon Lubkin: Dealer in Romancement." After what has been a life-long quest, Stubbs has found all he has been searching for: that elusive thing called "Romancement"

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The climax comes when Stubbs realizes "he had never seen the 'hideous gap'… between the 'N' and the 'C'" in the word. Therefore, the word is not one word, then, but two - Roman Cement. Simon Lubkin is no dealer in "Romancement," alas, but an ordinary vendor of cold, hard, cement. Stubbs's true hope is turned into a "phantom hope" (31, soaring, rackin). From this story in the *Train*, it's clear that Carroll had or was forming his views about the impossibilities of love long before he wrote the Alice books or works that followed. Carroll no doubt felt love - this much is clear, love for his siblings, his mother in particular, his father. We know that the death of his mother (just two days after he arrived at Christ Church) was one from which Charles never quite recovered. He was her little "Charlie" and her death, so shortly after he left the family home in Croft, came as a terrible shock. Mrs. Liddell died from what was then called (and vaguely) "inflammation of the brain" (which could be any number of illness or disease, but sounds a lot like encephalitis or meningitis, both of which inflame and put pressure on the brain and can cause death if bacterial).

Some have speculated that Carroll was writing, at least in part if not wholly, of his mother and his feelings in the poem "Solitude" (March 16, 1853). The poem is as titled: about a quiet and pensive person (man?) who loves the silent hill and stillness of the wood, he tells us. It is a holy place - what one could call a "thin" place - not of this world, yet not quite of some other. It is the in-between, the twilight space we sometimes occupy in moments of great intensity; moments of intense feeling and emotion. It is the place where it seems, Carroll often went and occupied after his mother's death, never quiet recovering and always part of him occupying that "thin place". It is here that he is safe to weep; here where vexed spirit can rest, and here where, "As infants sob themselves to sleep/Upon a mother's breast": he could safely say all that he had pent up

inside. But make no mistake; it is not the simple word "mother" that would tip us off, though surely this is of some significance. No. It is the discussion and verse of "joys that have once been". The desire to fully occupy bygone days and yet live in a cold world with "life's drear and barren scene". After all, Carroll tells us, what use is "breath" (life) if his lot is no more than a lasting sorrow? "If all the day that ends in death/Be dark with clouds of woe." Life here seems pointless. Love has gone. Love has, in short, left the building and we are left with a rather pointless life. We may breathe, we may go on, but to what end?

The writer instead tries to lose himself in reminiscence. In the "'golden hours of Life's spring" when there was "Innocence", "love", and "truth" - a "fairy-dream of youth!" To regain this spirit, this sense of unbridled joy, love, a world in which things made sense precisely because of the existence of one - of a mother - the writer here would give the all that he has "To be once more a little child/For one bright summer's day." The path is bright, the past is light. It is joyful, magical and full of "holy peace". It is a child's world and a child's love, unsullied by the world. Then something switches. The light is snuffed and there is a profound change. We are left with throbbing pangs, sorrow, woe, distress, and decay. Where once there was love, there is no more and one can hardly see the reason to go on living, as the writer tells us quite clearly. The golden days are gone. We are forever dreaming.

Carroll is coming to terms with some great loss here and one can reasonably assume that it is the loss of his mother, given the specificity of the wording. But what now? Now that his God has taken her from him, Carroll's' view has shifted. Life is no longer about love, or Love. It is a world that is empty and vacant. What was is no more. No matter that outwardly Carroll displayed his devotion to his God, how fair did he believe that God to be, if at all? Besides which, as a true logician, perhaps Carroll knew that life isn't fair and nobody promised it would be. Death, after all, is a natural part of life. Regardless, his mother was taken too soon, without warning, and at a pivotal time in his life. Could this have had some lasting impact on Carroll's views of love and even of his God? It seems likely, yes. There was a switchover. Carroll never went on to full Holy Orders for myriad reasons: some have said this is because of his speech hesitation, but to put a finer point on it, it seems that Carroll did not fully accept the Thirty Nine Articles (at one time, Forty Two Articles) of the Anglican church.

Deaths, pain, unfairness often make even the most devout individual question any existence of God. How many times do we hear of a young person dying, or one dying of an illness, and the trite, oft-repeated expression, "It was God's will." Rare is the rector who rejects this notion. Not always is it "right" or "our time". Sometimes, too often, God has nothing to do with the equation, a fact that is hard for some people to accept. The idea that there is a God who is a master puppeteer controlling the strings of our very existence is somehow comforting, even in death. One strives to believe that there must be some purpose. That death may be random is a terrifying thought and concept because it means it could (and does) happen at any time, to anyone, and for no reason. That life is in the here and now and this is it. People die. They die of disease and by chance. They die because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. And worst of all, people die for no reason. People die and we see just how unfair and random and tentative life truly is.

Carroll got a taste of this at an early age. Love, real Love can be taken away at any time. Just like Stubbs's "Romancement", it can vanish overnight or in a matter of moments. Sometimes, our "vision" of love is no more than a mistake. As for Stubbs, he simply failed to see the sign (signs?) as it truly was. Instead, he saw what he wanted to see, not life as it truly is. He projected his own search, his desire, onto something that never was.

It's a cruel joke that Stubbs's own eyes deceived him. We learn that even the self is unreliable. We see what we want to see, but this does not mean that it is necessarily reflected back at us, no matter how much we may wish it or will it. We learn then, in short, that even the self is unreliable. We become unreliable narrators of our own lives, and if we can't trust ourselves with the Truth with a capital T (if one believes in such Platonic ideals and absolutes), then what can we trust ourselves with? We lack control. We lack control over our lives, which can be snatched away; we lack control over the

lives of others which can likewise be snatched away at any moment; we lack control over our love, our grief, the feeling in the afterward. So we hang onto "love" while we have it - in some golden daydream - with the understanding, knowledge, that it will undoubtedly fade as summer's days likewise fade.

Given this, it seems perfectly normal to lose a child's pure sense of love or Love (there's that capital letter again), but acquire (even unwillingly) a more cynical view of love. It is Diogenes with his bright lamp, shining light his lamp in corners previously dark and hidden who shows us that life is not all pretty. That there is unfairness. The father of cynicism, he makes of us his followers - fellow cynics.

It is hardly unusual any fairytale to be dark, even grim and outright frightening although in many the heroine is generally saved by a handsome prince. One need only think of Snow White and her wicked stepmother who wants her dead. Better - what of Sleeping Beauty - hermetically sealed in her glass-coffin in a dark narcoleptic sleep and hidden in the deepest, darkest part of the wood as she twilight dreams (perhaps hopes?) for a prince who may arrive to awaken her from her deep somnolence and with a kiss on her cherry-devil lips.

The Grimm's Brothers' books are full of such tales as are books that have been passed down through generations; our *Little Red Riding Hood* facing the big, bad wolf, which is really just a version of *Beauty and the Beast*. Always there is beauty facing ugliness and evil and although we know or expect that good will triumph, we are not certain. Therein lies the drama and the crux of the tension on which the story must hinge. We don't truly know what will become of Beauty as she meets the Beast. We cannot know that it is her very goodness and her love of him that will serve as the hinge and the cathartic moment that will allow him to accept her love and, to speak the subtext and verboten, make of them lovers. This is implicitly understood. It is sous-silence; it is "beneath silence". There has long been a sexualized component to every variant of *Beauty and the Beast*.

The point: in all of these stories, we must first journey and usually through a deep and dark wood and we must face our fears or fall into deep sleep and hide and pray that some one other will "rescue" us. We wish to be found. We seek, but we do not always find. Children and adults alike have for centuries delighted in this darkness, with the expectation that all will end well and our heroine will be saved. It's hide and seek in a book. Before Carroll, it was rare, if ever, that a heroine had saved herself.

Carroll's Alice is slightly different in tone. For Alice, the game is Seek and Seek. Alice is constantly seeking affirmation. Affirmation of who she is, what she should be, how she should act, the "proper" way to be. She is met instead with contrary characters that question her with impossible riddles (some of which even Carroll did not know the answer to at the time of the writing). Alice seeks to find Wonderland, and once there, she seeks herself and some guidance.

That said, our heroine is not helpless. In fact, to see Jonathan Miller's 1966 film version of Wonderland, or if we read the book closely, our Alice is actually quite surly (even adamant at times, refusing to lose her identity) and is very smart ("Keep your temper!" warns the Caterpillar in Wonderland). She is savvy; she keeps her wits about her, is not easily ruffled, and takes each thing in turn. Despite the big, bad woods and all that she encounters, she remains for the most part, centered and anchored in a topsy-turvy world. Atypical for the usual fairytale heroine who is by definition a helpless and beautiful maiden, and surely not one who talks back! At best, the usual heroine can keep house, grow her hair long as a rope that can be climbed (hence some prince can climb it and voila! she is rescued), or perhaps spin draw into gold. She's good at domesticities, but ultimately, she must rely on someone else. Our Carroll has not followed the fairytale template. He has broken ranks and by definition then, Carroll's story breaks ranks with the others that came before.

Alice's salvation is Alice. That she keeps her wits about her in this 'mad' world is to her great credit. She does not lie down to die like Sleeping Beauty and wait for a prince, like virtually every other fairytale that ends happily, Alice realizes that to be truly happy lies within the self. Carroll did not write in any savior; there is no Prince Charming, and that

surely is no accident. Alice must save herself in the face of incredible odds and how like real life that is. What we do know is that in both of the Wonderland books, a catharsis has taken place.

It's interesting to note the word "catharsis". The only other creature who can experience such a catharsis in Wonderland is the Caterpillar and when you get down to it, he is ultimately the only truly helpful character in Wonderland, offering his advice (cryptic though it may be), he offers Alice pieces of his mushroom and this is perhaps the single biggest factor in "saving" Alice for it allows her access to all manner of worlds, even to Wonderland, and as the effects of the mushroom wear off, it likewise offers her escape out of Wonderland.

Our heroine journeys through a world in which the rules are illogical and arbitrary - rules for rules' sake, she seeks certain characters and places - someone to trust and some terra firma - yet despite all of her searching, she finds no one and all roads lead to the same place and when they don't, they lead to somewhere she definitely does not wish to be. This is a replica for so many of us and of our own childhood - a journey through a world that makes little sense and seems totally arbitrary.

Carroll, writing to an eleven-year-old correspondent when he was fifty-nine, wrote, "Love is the best thing in all the world." Was he sincere? No doubt, yes, love, but Love in the Platonic sense of the word and perhaps as an ideal. Some have suggested a double meaning in the sentence beyond simple friendship, yet to take Carroll's letter otherwise is to hint at a different kind of love - a sexual intentionality that simply was not there - regardless of the mythology that has sadly surrounded Carroll.

One only need consider that the Queen and King of Hearts are at the center of Wonderland, regardless of how they may act. As Rackin points out, even the ugly Duchess herself says to us, "'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!" But the Duchess is ugly and has a pig for a baby who she throws in the air and whom she beats (this is love? we wonder…) The Duchess herself may be rude, but she is nice enough to Alice albeit in some cryptic way. Is it an accident that the Queen is the Queen of Hearts? She whose non-stop message is "Off with her head" - so what are we to make of love after all.

We learn that love, for all that it may be, is ultimately out of our control. It is, like the queen, a fury unleashed. We are truly at the mercy of love. Love is cruel. It can be ruthless. In fact, love, if you let it, may even kill you if it has its way - the Queen of Hearts makes this much clear. Small wonder that Alice has such a sour attitude. The Queen of Hearts is painted, ironically, as heartless with a "blind and aimless Fury," Alice's search for love and/or beauty and security through Wonderland, that beautiful garden, is ultimately a failed mission.

*In Through the Looking Glass*, it doesn't get much better for Alice. She doesn't have exactly the same problems but ultimately, the confusion remains the same. Love is never clear. As it ends, Alice understands, she "ca'n't [sic] stand [it] any longer!". Both Alice books are "children's" tales, yet both work on an adult level and we know exactly how Alice feels.

Just as in her world underground, Alice's adventure on the other side of the mirror is another, ultimately, failed quest for love met with a "sheer and terrifying loneliness". Tenniel's drawings of Alice, even Carroll's original illustrations from Alice's Adventures Under Ground, only serve as a highlight and underscore to Alice's loneliness in a world that is ugly and distorted.

We tell ourselves that Carroll's words are "nonsense," (yet we would do well to remember that this nonsense was written by a logician and mathematician with a quick wit; and in that, this nonsense has a logic all its own.) Carroll's settings may be weird and wonderful, but there is logic within the illogical - a certain sense to the 'nonsense' and a cleverness always.

Most importantly, we know each of us what it is like to be Alice and to be without direction, simply aiming for beauty. Some people, some things even, will set us quite literally on the wrong path. or going about in circles. Just as Alice learns from the Red Queen in Through the Looking Glass we as adults know that sometimes we have to run very fast indeed just to stay in the same place.

That the Alice books are not "happy" books may not be the popular stance, it has been somewhere there in the back of our mind since Carroll's death in 1898. As Donald Rackin notes in the book Soaring with the Dodo, love and nonsense are essentially incompatible, although it is arguable that love is nonsense. There is no Garden of Eden. There is no Wonderland. Carroll's original title: *Alice's Adventures Underground* was perhaps more apt. Love is more akin to the dark wood in which we, like Alice often find ourselves lost, melancholy, and wholly alone. In short, we lose ourselves in love, and this is not a good thing.

Love may begin as a garden of beautiful flowers (who don't talk back), but it soon becomes a journey in a garden of snappish flowers and foliage with plenty to say, as in *Through the Looking Glass*, and a journey through a giant game, in Alice's case it is chess, out of which we must emerge without losing our singular identity.

As for Alice, as a child, looking for a child's love and reassurance, it is not to be found. She is utterly alone - these "magical places" are more akin to Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*. Love may indeed make the world go round, but it is not what saves Alice when all is said and done. The moral, if there is to be one (and Carroll, I think, wrote without intending any moral tag to his work in this case, or if he did, here, the moral is mixed. There is a magical Wonderland indeed, but the question, Can we occupy it in any "happy" way?). The moral then is that we must ultimately not only rely on ourselves, but also save ourselves and through this process, we live and we learn and we pass into the realm of adulthood where we know that the stuff of fairytales is but a pretty fiction.

**Edward Guiliano and James R. Kincaid, eds., *Soaring with the Dodo: Essays on Lewis Carroll's Life and Art*: University Press of Virginia/Lewis Carroll Society of North America**