CHAPTER FIVE

THE MADWOMAN IN THE STATIC

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me “still” –

Emily Dickinson

The acculturation of a female human begins in childhood. From their early years, girls are trained to behave differently in a society that appears to be a maze of inexplicable constraints for them, but not for the boy-child. This is a phenomenon that has existed for thousands of years in what is called by feminists, a ‘phallocentric’ society, and the Victorian Age was no exception. Primarily, female children are brought up to marginalise and objectify themselves, proselytised from human to thing – never allowed to see, only to be seen, becoming the only creatures on the planet who must use their eyes not merely to see the world but to monitor perpetually how they appear in the eyes of others. To be a girl is to grow up in a world where “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” (Berger 47)

To become a woman is to learn to negotiate through the strictures of a patriarchal and hegemonic set of discourses, literally to ‘learn the ropes’ that tie her from early in the childhood years. The dynamics of this oppression are communicated to her down through a diverse plethora of sources. She is virtually inundated, bombarded by messages of conditioning from agents of society such as educational institutions, school textbooks, comics, cartoons, animation films, parents, friends, neighbours, religion, movies, fashion, toys and virtually every visible or abstract entity of the socio-cultural lifeworld. The dominance of the male is so naturalised as to prevent questioning. The omnipresent textual
cannons keep her volleyed and thundered at, painting an environment of natural oppression that prevents her from wondering whether someone has blundered. Among these, Children’s Literature – books written for children (usually by conditioned adults) – has a significant role to play in reinforcing the gender-based biases and stereotypes of our societies. Critical evaluation of gender representations, and the gendered nature of Children’s Literature, is thus a much needed enterprise that may uncover the hidden aspects of children’s texts and the repercussions of the subliminal texts that foster irreparable alterations in a child’s psyche. In this chapter, therefore, I attempt to explore feminist theoretical perspectives to evaluate Nonsense, Carroll’s works (the *Alice* books in particular) and some limericks of Edward Lear.

The rich and complex history of Feminism has diverse trends and a variety of facets. Feminist thought has evolved over the years in three principal ‘waves’. The first wave was mainly political in focus and began in the second half of the nineteenth century and may be said to have extended until the aftermath of the First World War. The driving force of the movement was the idea that women should be granted the right to vote. The beginning of the second wave occurred in the 1960s and focused on developing a theoretical understanding of sexual difference and the political effects of these differences. Second wave feminism was characterised by differences in emphasis (Radical, Socialist, Psychoanalytic, etc.) among feminist thinkers and a general focus on epistemology and the social construction of human genderedness. In the 1990s, a new direction in Feminist thought led to what some have identified as a third wave which was “driven by voices marginalized by hegemonic second wave feminism” (Johnson 24) – for instance, the voices of Black women, women other than white Anglo-American-European-middle class – the voices of those gendered differently.

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82 The historical development and the numerous strands of feminism are beyond the scope of this dissertation and too wide and varied to be discussed here. Several excellent studies to which I have referred are listed in the *Bibliography*. 
The theoretical insights of the second wave psychoanalytic feminists are invaluable for their contribution to textual analysis and criticism. Psychoanalytic Feminism has a lot to offer for the criticism of children’s literature, allowing critics to focus on the social construction of female (as well as male) children and the way in which girl children are brought up to develop a particular kind of body-self relationship. In this chapter I shall, therefore, attempt to reveal new facets to Nonsense literature and the works of Lear and Carroll to study with the help of the theories of Feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. From Suffering to Suffrage

At the time that Lear and Carroll were writing, gender stereotypes were particularly clear. The Victorian episteme tended to define women in several characteristic ways, some of which would probably shock the modern reader. Femininity in the Victorian Age was measured by the following key standards: (1) domesticity (2) dependence on men (3) ‘innocence’ and (4) compassion/charity. Elizabeth Longford points out that women were supposed to possess a “natural goodness” and “the nineteenth century saw in women special qualities like delicacy, modesty and quietness” (Longford 19). They were to “always help and never answer back” (Lerner 213) and like Agnes in Charles Dickens’ David Copperfield, guide man to his ‘natural’ goal, success (Lerner 213). In contrast, men were meant to be adventurous, independent and enterprising. These stereotypes were engineered by a network of laws, beliefs, rules and attitudes – all of which ensured that women remained in a perennially passive role.

83 I shall discuss the tenets formulated by these great Feminist theorists as and when I read the texts through their perspectives. The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan (on which their concepts are based) has been discussed in the previous chapter, “Psycholinguistrieks.”
A society that enshrined independence as one of the highest human virtues constantly emphasized the desirability of women being kept in a totally dependent role.

(Dyhouse 175)

The “myth of delicacy” (Logan 68) was a pivotal stereotype used to constitute the image of domestic bliss for a woman and was “invented as a way of keeping women down” (Wilson 312). Dr. Gregory, a noted physician of the time, in *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), wrote:

> Your whole life is often a life of suffering. You cannot plunge into business or dissipate yourselves in pleasure and riot as men too often do, when under the pressure of misfortunes. You must bear your sorrows in silence, unknown and unpitied. You must often put on a face of serenity and cheerfulness, when your hearts are torn with anguish or sinking in despair. (qtd. in Dyhouse 175).

Evidently, the stiff upper lip was male but the face of forbearance was female. The wife-as-angel figure is more than evident in the works of Ruskin, Coventry Patmore and Charles Dickens.

The economic circumstances of a large British population were such that women were forced to join the labour force but were not allowed to join labour unions until the late Nineteenth Century. Women had no legal rights at all. In a legal system that appears ultra-

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84 It was Coventry Patmore whose poem “The Angel in the House” (1854-62), helped to perpetuate the Victorian ideal of the selfless and submissive woman. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) expressed how it was impossible for a woman to write unless she broke away from this stereotypical image: “Killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Woolf *The Death of the Moth* 151).

85 In 1874, Emma Patterson set up the Women's Trade Union League which successfully campaigned for better wages and improved working conditions. The gates to (male) organised labour were opened inch by inch, starting from 1889, when “a scheme was devised whereby any union admitting women was invited to affiliate with the League at the cost of a halfpenny per annum per female member. In return, the League offered the services of a woman organiser” (Dyhouse 183).
draconian to us today, “not only . . . did any property of a married woman, whether earned or
inherited, legally belong to her husband, but so did the children” (Wilson 305). Thanks to the
efforts of Caroline Norton and Mr. Talford – a lawyer and M.P. at the time – the Infants’
Custody Act was passed and became a law in 1839, allowing a degree of guardianship of
children to women when divorced (Wilson 306). In 1855, women were permitted to get back
their possessions and property by law, in the event of divorce.

The Feminist movement of the Victorian Age was “largely a bourgeois movement”
(Wilson 312) since middle class women were the only ones to have a reasonable degree of
access to resources and to reap the capitalist benefit of colonial trade. The exclusion of the
needs of working class women, however, is a little exaggerated (Dyhouse 182). Evidence of
this exaggeration lies in the fact that several middle class activists were instrumental in
organising women’s labour against utterly inhuman work rules and living conditions.

The two chief concerns of the women’s movements of the era were (a) Education and (b)
Suffrage.

Education: It was as late as 1848 that Queen’s College, the first college for women opened
in London. Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910), the first female physician in the U.S. and the
whole of the Anglo-American world, and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836 – 1917), the first
qualified woman doctor in England, both had to face difficulties and prejudice at every step
of their careers.86

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86 Elizabeth Garrett was refused admission to any of the medical colleges in England and
had to study privately. Elizabeth Blackwell was banned from practising in America and had
to go to Paris to function as a trainee ‘midwife’ but not as a physician. One of the British
scientific periodicals, The Lancet, called Elizabeth Garrett a hysteric.

It congratulated the students of the Middlesex Hospital for trying to get rid of her.
The editorial marvelled ‘that this lady is able calmly to go through the manipulations
of sounding for stone in the male bladder . . . insensible to the unpleasant feelings
Ironically, it was patriarchal ideology that ensured that girls were educated in the first place. Similar to the ethos in certain cultures in contemporary India today, girls needed to be educated to improve their value in the marriage market. Middle-class women often needed to earn money too and an educated wife was an attractive asset. The stereotypical concept of the ‘New Woman’ arose within the parochial, patriarchal and paranoid literature of the time. G.B. Shaw’s “unwomanly woman” (Dyhouse 187) smoked, bicycled and wore knickerbockers. Women who were ‘unwomanly’ can be seen in Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure (1895), George Gissing’s The Odd Women (1893) and not so well-known works such as Grant Allen’s The Typewriter Girl (1897) and The Woman Who Did (1895) and Lynn Linton’s The One Too Many. It is worth noting that Lear and Carroll, both, seem to have been unbiased in the matter of education for women. Carroll took it for granted that a girl should be educated, as is clear from the Alice books. Alice goes through several typical school tasks while interacting with the characters in Wonderland, many of which involve Multiplication (38), French (41), Geography (38), and numerous poems that she must recite. In Through the Looking Glass, she must perform a subtraction for Humpty Dumpty (268) and attempt some Nonsense additions, divisions and subtractions for the Red Queen and the White Queen before they fall asleep (TTLG 320–323). Lear, too, showed no gender bias in entertaining his child-friends. His “The Owl and the Pussy-cat” was written for the little daughter of John Addington Symonds because she was ill and needed to be amused (Noakes Wanderer 506). His Nonsense alphabet The Absolute Abstemious Ass was written for Daisy Terry – the first of many that he was to write for her over the years (Noakes Wanderer 514).

which her presence must arouse’. The article omitted to mention that the male bladder in question belonged to a child about two years old. (Wilson 312) Elizabeth Garret got her training in France and Elizabeth Blackwell got her MD in the United States. The first London School of Medicine for Women was set up only in 1874 by Sophia Jex-Blake.
Thus, it may be concluded that (a) when Lear and Carroll wrote, there was an openness towards the education of girl children among the bourgeoisie and (b) that both poets were quite unbiased in their approach to the education of the girl child.

**Suffrage:** One of the key supporters of electoral rights for women in England was John Stuart Mill (1806–58). Along with his wife, Harriet Taylor Mill (1807–58), he worked to bring radical changes in attitude, ideology and law. J. S. Mill “introduced an amendment to the 1867 Reform Act by substituting the word ‘person’ for the word ‘man.’” (Jenainati 45). The amendment, of course, did not win a vote. It was in 1869 that the National Woman Suffrage Association was created. However, British women failed to secure their right to vote in the nineteenth century. It was only in 1918 that women over thirty could vote; and it was as late as 1928 that all women were given the right to vote as men did.

It is pertinent that Lear and Carroll wrote at a time that women had no political influence (Lear’s Nonsense works were mainly published between 1846 and 1876 and

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87 In 1866, the Kensington Ladies’ Discussion Society – one of the few women’s associations of the time – presented a petition to J. S. Mill, signed by 1498 women, presenting their demands for women’s voting rights. In his speech, J. S. Mill commented that there was a general feeling that “women had no right to care about anything except about how they may be the most useful servants of some men . . . This claim to confiscate the whole existence of one half of the species for the supposed convenience of the other appears to me independently of its injustices, particularly silly” (Wilson 313-14). Eighty members voted with him.

88 Lewis Carroll loved dabbling in mathematical problems and puzzles. One of his unique recommendations was a voting system which declared the winner of an election based on “pairwise majority-rule elections” (Hemaspaandra 1) – voters’ preferences calculated on a comparative basis, pairing each candidate separately with every other for the purpose:

Lewis Carroll’s voting system works as follows. Each voter has strict preferences over the candidates. Each candidate is assigned a score, namely, the smallest number of sequential exchanges of two adjacent candidates in the voters’ preference orders (henceforward called “switches”) needed to make the given candidate a Condorcet winner. We say that a candidate c ties-or-defeats a candidate d if the score of d is not less than that of c . . . A candidate c is said to win the Dodgson-type election if c ties-or-defeats all other candidates. (Hemaspaandra 5)
Carroll’s, between 1865 and 1883). The socio-political environment created a background—an epistemic given—that augmented the perception of a woman as a helpless, inexperienced and immature. The significance of the Victorian perception of women becomes clearer if we take notice of the fact that, with the exception of Alice, perhaps, there are virtually no intelligent, self-assured, responsible or coherent female characters in the *Alice* books. The lack of political power also ensured that the woman’s *locus standi* was in the house, that she remained separated from the outside ‘world of men’. It perpetuated a situation in which she was denied any opportunity to prove her abilities in fields traditionally dominated by men, and thus kept subservient on account of her ‘ignorance’ of the ways of the world.

**The Currency of the Corpse**

It would be impossible to understand the position of women in the Victorian Age without a study of the phenomenon of prostitution and the attitudes of the contemporary legal system towards this commercialisation of the female body. A very infamous example of the blatant misogyny during the Victorian Age was the Contagious Diseases Act and its subsequent modified versions (1864, 1867/8, 1869). More than half of the inmates of most major hospitals of the time suffered from venereal diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhoea. The British government saw this as a symptom—and the cause of the symptom was the prostitute. The Contagious Diseases Acts declared that “to use a prostitute’s service was ‘natural’ even though the woman who provided the service was wicked” (Wilson 473). The law ignored the economic environment that was responsible for prostitution. The truth was that “the appalling conditions of female employment pushed many young girls into still another grim harsh world—the world of prostitutes, mistresses and unwed mothers” (Roberts 63).

The degrading outrages committed on women in the name of the Contagious Diseases Act may perhaps be seen as one of the factors that led to the emergence of a women’s
movement. The administration of the laws was disorganised and entropic. Several innocent women who happened to be in the vicinity of brothels were often rounded up and humiliated legally. Women suspected of being part of the trade were detained by a plainclothes policeman and then subjected to a fortnightly internal examination. If found suffering from gonorrhoea or syphilis, a woman could be interned in a “certified lock hospital” (a hospital with dedicated wards for patients of venereal disease) “for a period not to exceed nine months” (Walkowitz 2). To add insult to injury, when arrested, a woman was expected to acquiesce willingly in medical and police registration. If she refused to obey, she would be brought to trial and it would be her responsibility to prove her own virtue (Walkowitz 2).

The laws, besides ignoring the gross culpability and responsibility of the male, conveniently sidestepped the issue of the causes of prostitution. It was a time when poverty was extreme and working class girls were virtually driven like slaves in an “absolute level of subordination and acquiescence” (Walkowitz 20). Compared to working in rural ‘gangs’ under cruel ‘gangmasters’, women frequently found the profession of prostitution preferable, at least in terms of income. Fortunately – and thanks to the efforts of Josephine Butler of the Ladies’ National Association (LNA) – the acts were repealed between 1870 and 1886.

While no connections can be traced between these socio-political realities and the life and works of Edward Lear, it has been recorded that Lewis Carroll was not oblivious to the alternative reality of the feminine during the Victorian Age. In the 1880s, William Thomas Stead (1849–1912), a prominent British journalist, led a vehement campaign against child prostitution in the Pall Mall Gazette – a campaign that annoyed Carroll so much that he “wanted Stead to be prosecuted for obscene libel for the graphic way in which he presented his findings” (Hunt Alice xiv)89. Besides, a recent work by Jenny Woolf (2010) has accessed

89 I shall expand on the relation between the very possibility of Nonsense and society’s perceptions of women in the Victorian Age later in this chapter.
bank records and brought to light an interesting fact: that Carroll gave generously to charitable organisations like the Society for the Protection of Women and Children – which helped both, abused children as well as women, often to the extent of running up a debt (Chittenden Lewis Carroll ran up debts to save children n.p.). It is evident, then, that Carroll saw the two most marginalised sections of Victorian society, women and children, as being in desperate need of his empathy and support.

Besides, one of the prime reasons for the increase in women in this profession was the broken family. Most of the women in the trade came from families that were “unusually disrupted” and had “lost one or both parents” (Walkowitz 16). Prostitution gave several destitute and uprooted women a chance to lead independent, economically sound lives. Contrary to popular perception, prostitution was not an organised system in the Victorian Age. Brothels were mainly run by families which allowed single women who were not part of the profession to stay in as well and whose daughters were seldom part of it (Walkowitz 24). Driven by economic benefits, women who ran brothels often found the stigma of immorality surprising (Walkowitz 28). Brothel keepers who wished to join a women’s organisation in the 1860s saw themselves as normal, working or middle class women and expressed this to Sarah Robinson, one of the pioneers of social reform (especially among soldiers) who began a ‘temperance organisation’ which refused membership to the brothel owners of Portsmouth. The women were extremely upset at being rejected because,

You see, Mrs. Robinson, you get your living in one way and I in another. I pay my tradesman’s bills the same as yourself, and I do not see why I should be excluded.

(qtd. in Walkowitz 28).

The condemnation and blight heaped on the sex worker were, in Lacanian terms, an immature attempt to wipe out a symptom without analysing the cause that lay in the Real
Like Hitler’s representation of the ‘Jewish problem’, the administration took up the cudgels against the women, choosing to create an image of the women as flawed, rather than accepting that their conception of males as being ‘naturally’ carnal was itself a faulty one.

These alternative realities were quite glaring to the bourgeois public eye and needed to be shoved into invisibility desperately. The attempt to suppress this world as the ‘other’, led to the creation of a different kind of social ‘self’ for the middle-class family. By default, it (a) manufactured a circuit of relationships and beliefs that valorised the bourgeois family and the family structure, (b) encouraged a fantasy of marital and domestic bliss and safety and (c) positioned the middle-class woman on the other side of the binary opposition, fabricating an identity for her as a pious, passive, subservient, demi-goddess – the exact contrary of the prostitute. In this context, then, it was the perceptual construct of the Prostitute-as-signifier that enabled Victorian Patriarchy to constitute a false image of the bourgeois woman as the deified, asexual other, ‘the Angel in the House’. Writing Nonsense for children was, perhaps, an easy and convenient escape for Lear and Carroll, from the necessity and trickiness of categorising adult women at all.

The Foreign Mother

Another ubiquitous figure, especially in the upper and middle class Victorian family, was the governess. While leisure was the sign of masculine financial success and domestic feminine bliss, women rarely had any avenues for productive action. “The most popular alternative to vacuity for the middle classes was charity. Trained to be loving and emotional without sexuality, young ladies threw themselves into church work. . .” or “the making of useless objects for the local church, Anti-corn Law bazaar or missionary table.” (Vicinus xi).

Governesses were discussed and displayed but were supposed to stay behind the scenes. On the other hand, they were supposed to be well bred, reasonably educated and yet,
paradoxically, work among the many employees in the household of a wealthy family. Being a governess was often the only livelihood open to the daughter of an impoverished genteel family. A governess had to abandon friend and family for a round-the-clock devotion to the employer's family. Victorian parents wanted a woman who could teach the ways of the genteel to their daughters. Needless to say, it was the governess who helped construct and sustain the veneer of the bourgeois way of life of which Carroll and Lear were directly and indirectly part.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the paradoxical predicament of the prostitute and the unreal experiences of the governess, the beginnings of modern feminism can be found in the Victorian Age—probably one of the only fortunate things to happen to women at this age.¹¹

The Little Girl

Childhood happened in Britain only in the Nineteenth Century, but not as sudden explosion. One could trace the ancestry of the Victorian concept of childhood to William Blake's idyllic and joyous Songs of Innocence (1789). "It is as if, to every period of history, there corresponded a privileged age and a particular division of human life: youth is the privileged age of the seventeenth century, childhood of the nineteenth, adolescence of the twentieth" (Aries qtd. in Wullschlager 7). In the age of Lear and Carroll, the gap between the

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¹⁰ Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) is an apt illustration of the typical Victorian governess and the expectations that society had of her. Rosamond Oliver, a rich young woman who supports the school in which Jane Eyre teaches, sums it up when she says to her father, "she is clever enough to be a governess in a high family, papa!" (Bronte 393). A "clever" woman who was educated and had the right manners, but not the means to earn a livelihood, had little choice but to offer her services as a governess to "a high family" to survive.

¹¹ Feminists, prostitutes and governesses are conspicuous in the works of Lear and Carroll, by their absence—a fact that I shall attempt to discuss in the later sections of this chapter.
world of the child and that of the adult, which seemed to be widening in the Eighteenth Century, began to narrow (Prickett 176).

It must be understood that the character of Alice was by no means representative of the typical Victorian child (although she did represent the Victorian fantasy of the, pure, angelic, little girl). The census of 1901 classified 90% of the population as working class – about 30% of the population lived below the poverty line and in slums where toilets and rooms were shared by several families at the same time. A large proportion of the population of Victorian England was reeling under inhuman living conditions and irredeemable poverty. “The poor, and the children of the poor, continued . . . to lead their scarcely endurable existences” and “Victorian children had to be seen as expendable” (Wilson 264). Little boys slogged it out and often died miserable deaths working in coal mines, factories and as chimney sweeps.

Before the Edwardian obsession with the little boy, came the Victorian preoccupation with the little girl. Before Peter Pan, there was Alice. In an age of sexual repression, adult bourgeois men found a legitimate catharsis in fetishizing the little girl while simultaneously edifying her into asexual categories of beauty purity and innocence. The ubiquity of this phenomenon serves in a way to tone down the impression of Lewis Carroll as a paedophilic voyeur. John Ruskin himself was smitten by little Alice Liddel’s beauty and deeply distressed because Mr. and Mrs. Liddel arrived home early and then chose to remain in the same room as Ruskin and Alice for the rest of the evening (Wullschlager 11). Ruskin also fell in love with a girl called Rose La Touche when she was all of nine years old. Charles Dickens once said, “Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss” (Wullschlager 11).
Similar to Carroll’s desperate excursions in search of little girls, Francis Kilvert (1840–79), a diary writer and ecclesiast, once wrote that he had “travelled ten miles today over the hills for a kiss, to kiss that sweet child’s face” (Wullschlager 12). Kilvert once spotted a young girl posing naked for a sculptor and rapturously noted the “supple, slender waist,” the “graceful rounding of the delicately beautiful limbs,” the “rosy dimpled bottom” and the “tender swell of bosom” (Wullschlager 12). In a post-Freudian world we are struck by these attempts to sublimate the sexual impulse in the Victorian bourgeois gentleman. On the other hand, one wonders whether the Alice books would have ever happened if Freud had preceded Carroll in his observations. The fact remains that fascination with the female child was a fairly common tendency among the gentlemen of the time.

The paintings of the age, further emphasize this Victorian mythification of the female child. Before the Victorian Age, children were primarily painted wearing clothes, like grown-ups (Wullschlager 13). This reflects the pre-Victorian perception that children were little adults. In 1742, William Hogarth (1697 – 1764), the famous English painter, painted “The Graham Children” in adult clothes. Millais’ painting titled “Bubbles” (1886), on the other hand, shows a child dressed in a dishevelled manner, displaying childlike rather than grown up activities.

The idea of the child as a holy, pure and innocent being is an age-old belief in Western Christian thought and examples of this can be seen in the Bible (the Divine Child), Shakespeare (Richard III, King John), Dante (Ugolino’s children, Beatrice –herself was only eight years old when Dante met her first), Wordsworth (Intimations of Immortality), Blake (Songs of Innocence), etc. But it was only in the Victorian Age that children, in all their pristine habit and sacred aura took centre stage in novels as well as art. A popular subject was “the young girl in the guise of a secular goddess” (Wullschlager 20). Thomas Gotch’s painting titled ‘The Child Enthroned’ (1894) is an example of this. Lewis Carroll’s
photographs of young girls were also part of this uplifted objectification of the girl child.

"The child and the photograph were commodified, fetishized, developed alongside each other: they were laminated and framed as one" (Mavor 3). To add to the myth, the Victorians saw bliss even in the death of the ultra-pure child. When little Nell died in the serialised version of the *Old Curiosity Shop*, grown up men openly cried all over England (Wullschiager 20).

In order to build this ideational aberration, it was necessary to construct a whole lot of ancillary concepts. One of these was a pseudo-scientific conception of puberty. The fascination with pre-pubescent females was connected to a whole web of medical myths regarding menstruation. It was, for example, believed that there was a “necessity to remain in bed for the duration of the period” (Showalter *Victorian Women and Menstruation* 43). Showalter further reveals that the medical doctors of the time “believed that adolescence was a critical period for women, and that teachers ought to allow for weakness in girl students. Any kind of fatigue might be dangerous, whether it resulted from long walks, riding, dancing or lifting heavy weights” (43).

Paradoxically, though, working women were supposed to be unaffected by this and continued to work “without ill effects” (Showalter *Victorian Women and Menstruation* 43). The layering of myth over the biological difference of a woman was effective (i) in ensuring that bourgeois women stayed submissive and considered themselves weak, or dirty or ill for a good part of their lives, and therefore avoided any sort of adventure or long-term endeavour of their own accord – and (ii) in positing, as an obvious consequence and counterpoint, the pre-adolescent girl child as a clean, pure, healthy entity, fully female with no negative cultural signifiers preventing access or interaction, completely available to mould in mind and body. The girl-child was reconstructed as a dream-child. “Even Victorians who did not share Lewis Carroll’s phobia about the ugliness and uncleanliness of little boys saw little girls
as the purest members of a species of questionable origin, combining as they did the inherent spirituality of child and woman” (Auerbach 32).

“Adults took refuge in a fantasy of childish innocence and ignorance at a time when both appeared to have no basis in reality” (Fuller qtd. in Dusinberre 29). This edified, purified/petrified concept of the little girl was a bourgeois phenomenon, the working class not having the time or the resources to pamper their daughters into deities. In sum, therefore, the Victorian Woman was slotted into the pious end of the male’s Madonna-whore complex by a largely masculine ethos. Within this ultra-feminine fantasy was the construct of the little girl full of sugar and all that’s nice but no spice at all. All children were cherubs, little girls were faeries and none of the faeries were wicked.

The combination of overt sexual repression and the fetishization of the child was unique. The stage was now set for literary sublimation – the channelization of a libido that found all other channels of release illegitimate or prohibited – all other channels except the romance of the child in words, the romance of the words of children, and a new and efficient camouflage, the regressive, pre-adolescent legitimacy of Nonsense. In the following section, therefore, I shall attempt to take a Feminist perspective of Nonsense.

A Feminist View of Nonsense

Women as Words

“I am most interested in women as words – as the words they pull out of their mouths.”

Mary Ellman

Men have typically seen women as signifiers. Treating words as things and women as words, in consequence, makes men treat women as things. The gaps, silences, stutters, half sentences and topic jumps through which women sometimes communicate, are perhaps a result of the fact that language isn’t theirs, wasn’t made of, by or for them in the first place.
Language is, by nature, patriarchal. A commonly used example of this is the fact that most of the derogatory and abusive terms in any language are to do with – in a manner direct or indirect – a woman or her sexuality. A woman’s words, therefore, are words given to her by men. Men have always named and women learn how to name and how to use names the way men do, if they must wade through this morass of foreign terminology. To a woman, therefore, every word is part of a foreign language that she must grapple with and somehow use to communicate differently, or be branded a madwoman or a speaker of nonsense.

It seems that there is always a way to do and say things, and by a convenient coincidence, that way is the male way. ‘Sense’ is male, ‘Nonsense’ is female. And of the two, Nonsense is the excluded element. By default, the female has been excluded with it, precisely because she is not ‘with it’. The prefix ‘non’ implies the negation of sense and the term ‘non-sense’ seems to have been attached conveniently to the female of the species for they are ‘not-man’, being made up of whatever the man is not. Nonsense is subversive to patriarchy as it is based on intuition, intertextuality, a-logicity and fantasy. Nonsense is perceived as a non-science.

The unscientific nature of children, women and Nonsense makes them siblings in the ostracised family of the feminine. Nonsense is not only marginalized in the academic scheme of things but also in the discourse of daily life. Irigaray “defines marginalized discourse as feminine” (Gresham 232) and “outlines what she sees as the difference in traditional, acceptable (masculine) discourse and that which is marginalized, unacceptable (feminine) discourse” (Gresham 232). After all, to the male, the words of a female “are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready made grids, with a fully elaborate code in hand” (Irigaray This Sex which is Not One 28–29).

While women are reduced to signifiers, their words are seen as female, or feminine. A woman’s words are perceived by patriarchy as being suffused with femininity and all the
stereotypical baggage that comes along with it. A woman is a mere signifier that is kept out of ‘meaningful’ discourse. In that ‘sense’, women are the non-sense of civilisation. Her signifiers are mere women. Thus all the words she uses are equivalent to nothingness. A woman’s silences are not heard as words but her words are heard as silence. Like the unfounded stigma associated with a female driver, the fact of her being female supersedes the referential or semantic value of her words. Nonsense – in a patriarchal symbolic order – is, therefore, conveniently slotted into the category of the feminine, for it is the feminine that was already classified as Nonsense. “Women’s access to discourse involves submission to phallocentricity, to the masculine and the symbolic: refusal on the other hand, risks re-inscribing the feminine as a yet more marginal madness or nonsense” (Jacobus 68). The one who goes against phallocentric language is typically branded as ‘mad’ but the one who conforms, ironically, reiterates and reinforces the marginal nature of the feminine.

The way in which patriarchy tends to fence in the female is not restricted to the Victorian Age. However, it took the post-structuralist feminists of the twentieth century to discover a way to escape the socio-linguistic trap.

Chiaros-chora

Structuralism was plagued by a chiaroscuro effect, a play of binary oppositions, black and white, to present an illusion of depth. Julia Kristeva (born 1941), the Bulgarian-French feminist, has made a significant contribution to Feminist theory during the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing from Structuralism (and Lacanian thought), Kristeva presented her own perspectives on where to find the outside space for Feminists to speak from, while filtering out the patriarchal binarism that characterise these very theories. Going beyond Lacan, Kristeva observes that “the entrance into language is not just the result of lack and
castration. Rather, pleasure and excess, as well as lack, motivate the move into language” (Groden 2).

Kristeva posits the pre-linguistic body as the realm of the semiotic, as against the symbolic that occurs after the Oedipal stage is completed. Language is not just made up of signifiers. There is an undertone, a “subterranean element of meaning within signification that does not signify” (Groden 2).

At the Mirror Stage, the subject is in the ‘thetic’ phase, a free-floating stage in which the oedipal identification has yet to occur, the identification which signals the ‘thetic break’ and the beginning of the strictures of the symbolic structure. She posits the concept of the

Semiotic—a pre-linguistic entity which perpetually rises to challenge the Symbolic, leading to a dialectical movement between the two.

The Semiotic is a signifying process that facilitates and structures the disposition of the drives. The Semiotic is characterised by a Chora—a space that represents the “instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect—the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defence against autoeroticism and the incest taboo). Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (Timaeus 48–53), a chora, a receptacle…” (Kristeva Abjection 14).

The Chora is a rhythm, a non-expressive totality, a motile and uncertain articulation that surfaces in the symbolic as ruptures and gaps. The Symbolic rejects the Semiotic; or, in Kristeva’s words, “the sign represes the chora in its eternal return” (Kristeva Abjection 14). The Chora is the entity that functions as the underlying principle of the Symbolic, giving it breath and movement. Yet the Symbolic tries to suppress the Semiotic—the pre-linguistic drives—simultaneously working with the Chora and against it.
The Chora resists signification but is generated in order to achieve this signifying state. It is the realm of unary signifiers where no patriarchal language laws operate. The Semiotic is that pre-social space wherein the subject is both, created and negated and the Chora is the force that functions here. According to Kristeva, it is the mother's body that connects the Symbolic and the Semiotic Chora. Patriarchy's rejection of the female body and misrepresentations of the maternal body are a sign of the phallogocentric Symbolic Order attempting to repress the Semiotic Chora – in other words, an attempt at suicide.

The Semiotic reveals itself in voice, gesture and colour, infiltrating into texts in the shape of texture, tone and rhythm, enabling the discharge of the drives into the self-alienated subject of language. The Symbolic makes referentiality feasible but the Semiotic charges it with the movement, balance and pulsations without which all signification would be meaningless.

The Semiotic type of person – the artist, the Nonsense writer, the poet, the musician – emphasizes multiple and fluid subject positions, stresses ambiguity instead of fixity of meaning, movement instead of stasis. The Semiotic persona thrives in the intertext rather than the text in the heterogeneity of the pre-symbolic.

Patriarchy tends to shun this language as it threatens homogeneous signification. The Semiotic, then, is the last refuge of the female (more so, the feminist), to salvage her existence, to become her own kind of speaking subject in place of the silent spectator/victim that she has been reduced to in this omnipresent, male textuality.

Nonsense, as a genre, is precisely this. It prefers ambiguity, abhors stasis, evades fixity and revels in revealing the loopholes in the Symbolic Order, language, culture and society. Nonsense, therefore, is the Chora itself and Nonsense texts are the voice of the Semiotic. Small wonder, then, that Nonsense texts, in spite of their radical alterity, still persist in our
memories and engross our minds. Returning to the Semiotic experience of the Nonsense texts throws into relief the fallacies of our Symbolic existence and, perhaps, helps us in the end to make sense of it all, helps us to live better. Parsons (1994), in a rare "semanalytic approach to nonsense" (57), points out that, Nonsense is unlike the Kristevan Chora which "is engaged in a process of 'negativity'" (61):

Nonsense holds in flux seemingly opposing states, too, but even while it allows these states to exist within a larger continuum, non-sense language serves as the point at which they meet – it both bridges and contains antithetical elements. Nonsense, as a place of merger, is quite different from what Kristeva names the thetic phase, the point at which the semiotic and symbolic (if imagined spatially) touch, the 'threshold' between the two. And it is here, paradoxically, at the point of merger that nonsense and Kristevan poetic language diverge; where Kristeva’s poetic language involves the inhabitation of the symbolic by the semiotic, nonsensical language requires cohabitation, and not just of the semiotic and the symbolic, but of several orders more multiple than those in Kristeva’s model. (Parsons 61)

Whether, in Nonsense, the Semiotic inhabits the Symbolic (according to Kristeva) or cohabits it (according to Parsons), either way, the fact remains that Nonsense functions at the level of the pre-symbolic – the realm of the Chora. This enables Nonsense to escape phallic strictures and affirms its femininity.

Luce Irigaray traced three qualities of the feminine: the tactile, the fluid and the simultaneous. Barbara Godard, quoting from This Sex Which is Not One, summarises Irigaray’s views:

To approach the feminine as a style but not a style, is to explore a way of looking at things that does not privilege sight, distinctions, but the “tactile” which puts things
back in touch with themselves without constituting any unity. Desiring “the proximate” rather than “(the) property,” its motifs or “self-touching” and “proximity” cannot “appropriate the feminine for discourse.” This way of working with words involves “simultaneity” – “its proper aspect” that is never fixed in the “identity-of-self of some form.” It is “fluid,” exhibiting those characteristics of fluids that create dynamics, “those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbours” (Godard 103–104).

Nonsense is fluid. We flow from one chapter to another, one limerick to another, never allowed to fixate ourselves in our subject positions or as a particular kind of reader. Nonsense is tactile. It works on more senses than one, using rhythm, illustrations and interactivity at the verbal level, forcing us to think and associate those linguistic units that we had kept separate until then. Lear’s Nonsense Botany plays on two sensory levels: the visual (his hilarious sketches of bizarre plants) and the auditory (using the typical Linnean suffixes to make the names sound authentic, eg. *Tickia Orologica, Washtubbia Circularis, Shoebootia Utilis*). Lear’s limericks also, function at two levels – the rhymes and the drawings. If we look closely, every sketch seems to go beyond the words of the limerick it supports and gains a significance of its own. An apt example of this is the limerick “There was and Old Man in a Marsh.”

![Fig. 5.1. “There was an Old Man in a Marsh” from Edward Lear, *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense* (London: Penguin, 2000; print; 336).](image-url)
There was an Old Man in a Marsh,
Whose manners were futile and harsh;
He sate on a log, and sang songs to a frog,
That instructive Old Man in a Marsh. (Lear 336)

What is most noticeable here is that the man in the illustration looks remarkably like the frog. Pendlebury points out that the man in another limerick titled “There was an Old Man in a tree/Who was horribly bored by a Bee;” (Lear 161) also “resembles the bee” (Pendlebury 83). She observes that

The effect of this style of illustration is very often to suggest amity or kinship between man and beast: an incongruity that is humorous even without the interplay with the poem and may also (as is the case in the “Old Man in a Tree”) serve to contradict the sense of the verse. (Pendlebury 83)

The illustrations, therefore, have nuances that give them an identity of their own, compelling the reader to deal with the rhyme and the visual at different levels simultaneously.

Nonsense is simultaneous. It compels us, especially through parody, to read parts of the Nonsense text while keeping in mind the original, or another textual entity, holding it at the back of our minds to understand the text better. Each of Lear’s limericks seems to make more sense to us when we simultaneously suspend in our minds the typical limerick form and all the ‘old men’ and ‘old women’ that Lear has written about before. His consistency in style – both in his drawings and his rhymes and stories – gives the reader an impression that each of the individual texts is not separate at all, but part of one large creation.

Nonsense is feminine – a proof of which is the fact that it rarely finds a place of study or focus in our patriarchal University hierarchies. It is the pulsation of light and dark, the chiaroscuro – which I shall term the ‘Chiaroschora’ – the play between the binary
oppositions that give depth to the structure of language and society, the in-betweenness that occurs when light and dark are both deconstructed, the splintered-textuality of the extra-linguistic. Nowhere does the otherness of the feminine manifest itself better than in the form of Nonsense.

**The Madwoman in the Static**

Much – perhaps too much – has been already written about the *Alice* books in the Western world (though the same cannot be said about the works of Edward Lear.) “The secondary literature on Carroll and the *Alice* books – vast, and mostly more nonsensical than the stories themselves – tells us much about the commentators from generation to generation” (Wilson 327). However, it is necessary to undertake a feminist analysis of these works, and the works of Edward Lear, since (a) a dedicated and thorough feminist look at Nonsense works has yet to be undertaken – Feminist critiques of Nonsense are few and mainly piecemeal. (b) Critical work on Nonsense (and Feminist Criticism of Children’s Literature) is particularly conspicuous in India by its absence. In this section, therefore, I shall first analyse, through a Feminist looking glass, the characters of the works of Carroll and Lear, their representations of physical form and in relation to this, their portrayal and understanding of spatiality, proportion and beauty.

**Idol Chatter**

In a man’s world, a woman is never human. She is either idolised or objectified – and locked away. Men tend to dismiss women’s talk as so much static on the radio, mere noise in the act of communication. They ignore a woman’s words for if she speaks, she speaks differently and must be silenced; if she appears, she appears different and must be hidden away from sight. She must be kept silent, still, static, lest she upset the Adam’s Apple Cart.
She is, therefore, termed ‘mad’, her words classified as ‘Nonsense’ and her body as inferior, all of which are pushed out of the line of sight of the male gaze.

It is deeply significant that the fundamental concept on which Chess is based is almost completely absent from *Through the Looking Glass* – the idea of a battle between two warring armies – except, perhaps, in the momentary and absurd fight between the Lion and the Unicorn. Carroll seems to have feminised the board, cutting out the inessentials and focusing on the rules and making the whole purpose of the game, the accomplishment of a mission – the mission to get a pawn (Alice) to reach the final squares on the opposite side of the board and become a queen – Queen Alice.

Alice, and several characters of Lear’s limericks, are recalcitrant females. In this section, I analyse the characterisation of the female figures in the works of Carroll and Lear and show how Nonsense Literature exposes the typical conceptualisations of the female and how – and whether – these are challenged.

In the *Alice* books, Carroll has successfully created four female characters\(^{92}\) that might, in a way, be said to represent the four possible roles into which patriarchy pigeon-holes women, compelling them to become certain kinds of persons, either extremely submissive, hyper-aggressive, ambivalent or bewildered.

**The White Queen:** A Queen is definitely a figure of power – one of the few positions allowed a woman that is high up in the male, hierarchical social set-up and definitely the most powerful figure on the chess board. In *Through the Looking Glass*, however, Carroll transforms one of the queens on the board – the White Queen – into a scared and timid

\(^{92}\) The fifth – and most significant – female character is Alice. I analyse her character later in the chapter.
woman who must be covered by Alice and can only “look at her in a helpless and frightened sort of way” and “repeat bread-and-butter” to herself (245).

Carroll was quite clear about how he wanted the White Queen to appear to his readers and viewers: “Lastly, the White Queen seemed, to my dreaming fancy, gentle, stupid, fat and pale; helpless as an infant; and with a slow, mauldering, bewildered air about her just suggesting imbecility, but never quite passing into it; that would be, I think, fatal to any comic effect she might otherwise produce.” (Carroll qtd. in Gardner AA 245) At a time when innumerable jingoists were conquering the world for Her Majesty Queen Victoria, it suggests considerable gumption on Carroll’s part to envisage a queen as “helpless”. To portray a queen as bordering on imbecility, however, is positively audacious.

It is interesting also, that Carroll compares the White Queen to a helpless infant. This is precisely the position into which patriarchal hegemony pushes a woman. A phallic society feminises all children and infanticizes women, thereby, dismissing the talk of both as babble, their strengths as weaknesses and their bodies as things.

The White Queen is a significant addition to the story as she has a problematized relationship with her apparel. Women’s dress was a way of interacting with other women as well as men – particularly signifying the class from which a woman came. The corset, for example, was a clear sign of a woman who “did not have to do manual labour” (Kortsch 60) for it constricted the female body into an unnatural hour-glass figure which would ensure limited physical movement. However, working class women had their own versions of the corset, which made them feel upwardly mobile and represented their aspirations to become part of the middle class. “The hourglass figure provided visual verification of a woman’s gentility and respectability. Yet, as theorists writing both before and after Freud have argued, this articulated figure also emphasized the eroticism and the sexual potential of the female
form" (Kortsch 60). Dress was so designed as to heighten a woman’s secondary sexual characteristics. It is worth noting that, on the evidence, none of the female characters in Tenniel’s illustrations seem to be clad in a bodice or deformed by a corset. In fact, the Red Queen and the White Queen, are both shaped like chessboard characters, their gowns divided into layers of horizontal folds from which the feet emerge. The White Queen and the Duchess are wrapped up in shawls and their figures are far from the hourglass proportions that were the ideal of the age. As Kortsch points out, “choosing not to wear a corset, depending on the decade and one’s class and social circle, identified a woman as a prostitute, dress reformer, aesthete or feminist.” (56) Would that imply that Carroll and Tenniel had imagined feminists in the figures of their fictional female characters? One of Tenniel’s illustrations in *Punch* – ‘The Ghost in the Looking-Glass’ or ‘The Haunted Lady’ (1863) shows that he was keenly aware of the army of underpaid and overworked needlewomen that worked themselves to death to satisfy a bourgeois fetish. The illustration shows a typical lady being dressed by a needlewoman behind her and staring at her image in the mirror. The words at the bottom of the illustration (“We would not have disappointed Your Ladyship, at any sacrifice, and the robe finished, Ó Merveille.”) coupled with the image of a dead working class woman in the mirror makes a scathing statement on the dress culture of the age and its injustices. We must remember that, in the Victorian Age – and far into the twentieth century – “girls of all classes were generally taught some type of needlework” but that “does not mean that all women enjoyed sewing, or that all women sewed well” (Kortsch 26). Carroll suggests the difficulties in women’s dressing in the chapter titled ‘Wool and Water’ in *Through the Looking Glass*. The White Queen just cannot seem to hold on to her shawl in spite of putting dozens of pins into it. The bourgeois Alice is surprised at the unkempt White Queen’s dishevelled dress:
It would have been all the better, it seemed to Alice, if she had got someone else to
dress her. She was so dreadfully untidy. "Every single thing's crooked," Alice
thought to herself, "and she's all over pins! - May I put your shawl straight for you?"
she added aloud.

"I don't know what's the matter with it!" the Queen said, in a melancholy voice.

"It's out of temper, I think. I've pinned it here, and I've pinned it there, but there's
no pleasing it!" (TTLG 246)

In the first place, a queen would be the last person to put pins into her own clothes when
mere upper class ladies of stature had their own retinues of servants to do it for them.
Carroll's depiction of the White Queen bordering on imbecility is another tongue-in-cheek
comment on the elaborate and unwieldy dress code of the era. The figure of the White Queen
is presented as a misfit precisely because she is unable to manage her dress.

Her most memorable words are her attempt to explain to Alice how things work in the
Looking-Glass world, where the effect comes before the cause. She begins to cry and scream
because her finger is bleeding due to a pin-prick that is yet to happen:

"I haven't pricked it yet," the Queen said, "but I soon shall - oh, oh, oh!" (TTLG 249)

The White Queen, then, symbolises a woman's guilt about things that she hasn't done. It
doesn't matter what a woman is, she must be guilty - a primordial Eden-based, primitive and
unavoidable guilt surrounds the woman - and specifically the Victorian woman - wherein the
man is never to blame but the woman always is.

A woman is usually caught between what she should be (jam tomorrow) and what she
should have been (jam yesterday) but is not allowed to be in the present, at all. While the
male plans his conquest of the world for the future, she must continue living backwards.
constantly trying to make herself into an asexual, passive, tender, pure infant. One of the most famous lines of the *Alice* books is spoken by the White Queen:

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

*(TTLG 251)*

Victorian women, pigeon-holed in their domestic roles, tied up with layers of cumbersome clothing, probably had to convince themselves of the *naturalness* of their situation every day.

**The Duchess:** The Duchess, who figures in the first of the *Alice* books is another anomaly of feminine royalty. Alice first finds her in Chapter VI of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, sitting on a piece of furniture that could not be farther from a throne - a three legged stool - and nursing a baby. Her references to the little bawling boy as a 'pig' are perfect examples of one of the most 'unacceptable' aspects of motherhood, i.e. the occasional feelings of animosity and frustration that a weary mother might sometimes feel towards a petulant infant.

While the Duchess is not a mother to the baby boy she holds, Lewis Carroll’s representation of the female caregiver as full of aggression is definitely a drastic shattering of stereotypes in an age when the woman was the 'angel in the house.' Most striking is her utter indifference to the child, ignoring a saucepan that "flew close by his nose" and "very nearly carried it off" *(AA 84).*

Men, patriarchy and male texts perpetually valorise motherhood, deifying the experience to unnatural and meta-human levels, disallowing the verbalisation of the traumas and frustrations that accompany the joys and love of bearing/rearing a child. Women could never fit the stereotypical cultural constructions of motherhood which denied them the right to have human feelings.
Women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates a basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres. But these spheres operate hierarchically. Kinship rules organize claims of men on domestic units and men dominate kinship. Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women. (Chodorow qtd. in Rollin 61)

Patriarchal tenets of motherhood, then, function to relegate and confine women to the domestic space, thereby ensuring their lack of access to the public or political spheres, perpetuating the dominance of the male. D. W. Winnicott's work on the love/hate relationship of a mother with her child is significant here. Winnicott points out that the unique thing about motherhood is that mothers often experience feelings of hatred towards their children but do not really act them out or act upon the child – one of the easiest things for an adult to do to a helpless infant. "The most remarkable thing about a mother is her ability to be hurt by her baby and to hate it so much without paying the child out and her ability to wait for rewards that may or may not come at a later date" (Rollin 106). According to Winnicott, the mother "hates her baby from the word go" because

The baby is a danger to her body in pregnancy and birth
The baby is an interference to her private life, a challenge to preoccupation.
The baby hurts her nipples by suckling, which is at first a chewing activity.
He is ruthless, treats her as scum, an unpaid servant; as slave.
She has to love him, excretions and all, at any rate, at the beginning till he has doubts about himself.
He tries to hurt her periodically, bites her, all in love. (Winnicott qtd. in Rollin 106)
In the Victorian Age, the fantasy of the perfect mother had begun. Mother Hubbard was a figure created in 1805 (Rollin 104) and she, in each one of the fifteen verses, inevitably returns to the dog/child (Rollin 103), enabling him to finally be “dressed in his clothes”, i.e. to reach a level of maturity thanks to her tolerating all his antics until then. By 1865, the time of publication of the *Alice* books, the domestication of the mother was complete. At such a juncture, to have been confronted by the following verses, must have been a sort of shock to the British reader:

Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases.

CHORUS

Wow! Wow! Wow!
I speak severely to my boy,
And beat him when he sneezes.
For he can thoroughly enjoy
The pepper when he pleases!

Wow! Wow! Wow! *(AA 85)*

While singing the first verse, the Duchess gives a violent shake to the child and at the end of every line. During the second, she throws the boy “violently up and down” (ibid.).

While most critics have seen this episode as evidence of Carroll’s (well-documented) disgust for little boys, few have realised the subversive and perceptive representation here, of the animosity and aggression of a mother toward a child. Carroll gets away with this piece of subversion in the dual disguise of the Fairy Tale and Nonsense.
The Red Queen: Carroll, during the dramatisation of *Alice* for the stage, wrote in an article titled *Alice on the Stage*:

The Red Queen I pictured as a Fury, but of another type; *her* passion must be cold and calm; she must be formal and strict, yet not unkindly; pedantic to the tenth degree, the concentrated essence of all governesses. (Carroll qtd. in Gardner *TTLG* 206)

While children would have to wait almost a century for Mary Poppins to enter their lives, they would have been quite familiar with the typical governess. The increasingly wealthy middle class had made the governess an integral part of the home. The governess (as discussed earlier in this chapter) was supposed to be an asexual omnipresent, ever self-effacing, yet active person. Carroll’s Red Queen is definitely not the subservient type but retains the stereotypical stern veneer of the profession.

The Red Queen seems to symbolise the ultimate governess who has understood language and societal interactions better than any other character in *Through The Looking Glass*. The girl child must be taught the wily ways of the chess board and the world. The Red Queen teaches Alice never to be sure of herself, pointing out that whatever she says could be construed as nonsense – perhaps by virtue of the fact that she is a girl:

“I only wanted to see what the garden was like, your Majesty – “

“That’s right,” said the Queen patting her on the head, which Alice didn’t like at all:

“though, when you say ‘garden’ – *I’ve* seen gardens compared with which this would be a wilderness.” (*TTLG* 206)

Similarly, the Red Queen claims that she could show her “hills compared with which you’d call that a valley,” and that “*I’ve* heard nonsense compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary.” (*TTLG* 207)
In the words of William Empson, the books are “so frankly about growing up that there is no great discovery in translating them into Freudian terms” (39). A lot can be said with reference to the Red Queen’s dialogue with Alice and her process of growing up, in non-Freudian terms. The Red Queen’s corrections are admonitions to Alice—telling her that signifiers are, in the end, man-made, an example of which is that ultimate compendium of signifiers, but which is a form of Nonsense anyway, because the only way to understand one word is to go through a whole lot of words which can only be understood through other words in their turn. She, therefore, indirectly warns Alice that when she says the words—and because she says them—they are liable to be unheard, suppressed, censured, made to mean something other than she intends, declared inferior to a higher truth which is as nonsensical as any other sentence in the English language.

Finally, the Red Queen’s most famous utterance also appeals to be apt for the female predicament:

“Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.” (TTLG 210).

These lines, probably among the most quoted lines of the Alice books, have usually been used to refer to competition and rapid changes in Politics, Management or the Economy. They have also been used for women having to prove themselves—or keep up with the irrational standards of beauty in a male society, the impossible demands of the male gaze93.

93 Efrat Tseelon, for example, in her book titled The Masque Of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life points out that the rise in number of women resorting to cosmetic surgery to live up to unrealistic standards of beauty is a bit like the Red Queen Effect (although she mistakenly attributes the lines to the Duchess):

The paradox of preserving female beauty, in her race against the hour-glass, is captured by the duchess in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass where she explains to Alice that: ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.” The essence of the paradox is that however fast she runs to control her body, the woman can never confidently master it. (Tseelon 80)
The lines take on a more pithy significance when we remind ourselves that they are spoken by a woman to a little girl. The fact of their gender alters the meaning and referentiality of the Red Queen’s words. We now understand that the allusion could well be to the perennial situation of women in a male society – that they have to work twice as hard to prove themselves in a man’s world, that they must perform superhuman feats, juggling multiple worlds, the domestic with the public, the political with the familial, the practical with the spiritual, to gain even the most minimal degree of respect and position in this world of men. “As preparations for queenship, Alice is sent through a course of training by the Red and White Queens – a training and an examination which have a shadowy resemblance to a trial” (Greenacre 118). As we proceed through the Alice books, we increasingly get the feeling that she seems to be going through a series of tests. It definitely appears to be a training course for queenship of a different sort – the entry into a masculine hierarchy wherein she must rule – it is a trial by fire, a journey that she must suffer in order to grow up, to transform herself from a little girl into a subjugated, indoctrinated woman.

The Queen of Hearts: Even though the story sticks to the nursery rhyme that claims that the Knave of Hearts stole the tarts, Carroll’s Queen of Hearts seems the least likely person to have made them. Carroll depicts her state as bordering on a sort of madness – she is extremely irritable, hyper-aggressive, bossy and more dominant than the submissive and timid King of Hearts.

“I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as some sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion – a blind and aimless Fury.” (Carroll qtd. in Gardner Alice 109)

The Queen of Hearts is “madly lustful for everyone’s head” (Greenacre 116) but, as the Gryphon points out, “never executes nobody” (AA 125). Her desperation for decapitation has
been noted by critics as a monstrous desire for violence and the Freudian connection with castration is convenient and unmistakable.

I am, however, inclined to view the Queen of Hearts as the sort of personality that is one of the few available to a woman when she comes to power in a male-dominated society. When a man becomes powerful, part of his power comes by virtue of his being a man, from the fact that he is a male in the first place. This fundamental advantage is inaccessible to a woman. The Queen of Hearts is an example of a woman who, once having attained a position of authority in this world, must double her masculine aggression to gain even half the respect that a man would get in the same position. A woman, when in power, often needs to obfuscate her femaleness, to tone down her femininity in terms of both her physical appearance and her nature. The Queen’s irrational and cut-throat declamations are a defence mechanism, a reversal. They enable her to survive and sustain a semblance and appearance of authority in a hierarchy that has a masculine set of rules and in which feminine authority has no space to function. All her shouting and roaring “in a voice of thunder” (Aa 111), appears nonsense to the reader as well as to Alice, precisely because the threats are hollow and we catch the Queen in her futile game of trying to act like a masculine monarch. If the heads were actually rolling, the reader’s perception of the Queen would probably switch from ‘madwoman’ to ‘witch’ – which would suggest volumes of the reader’s own view of women.

The Daisy Chain

Carroll also shows us that within the world of women, there are hierarchies in which, the more masculine oppress the feminine. The Duchess is petrified of the Queen of Hearts and is eventually put into prison. However, when she is released, she spares no opportunity to dig her sharp chin into Alice’s shoulder and bludgeon her with indiscriminate morals. The Duchess, therefore, is a bit of a bully: she vents hostility and violence on a defenceless baby
and oppresses Alice with her moralistic digs. However, she does nothing to prevent the violent cook from flinging vessels at her and, as bullies do, quavers at the first sign of authority:

But here, to Alice’s great surprise, the Duchess’s voice died away, even in the middle of her favourite word ‘moral’ and the arm that was linked into hers began to tremble. Alice looked up and there stood the Queen in front of them, with her arms folded, frowning like a thunderstorm.

“A fine day, your Majesty!” the Duchess began in a low, weak voice.

“Now, I give you fair warning,” shouted the Queen, stamping on the ground as she spoke; “either you or your head must be off, and that in’about half no time! Take your choice!”

The Duchess took her choice and was gone in a moment. (AA 123)

The Duchess seems to vacillate between different roles (of bully and victim) depending on who she is with. The White Queen is eternally confused, unable to deal with herself, her body, her clothes or the circumstances she is in. The Red Queen takes on a role of exaggerated masculinity to try and maintain her position of power. In a societal structure where masculine parameters operate, it’s every woman for herself. Some choose to become like the men – or what the stereotypical notion of masculinity says they should be. Others, as I have demonstrated in my study above94, stay bewildered like the White Queen or vacillating like the Duchess.

94 Alice does not fit into any of these categories and therefore I have not included an analysis of her character here (see pp. 324 – 29 for a study of Alice).
Lear’s Queers

The female characters of Edward Lear’s limericks are primarily recalcitrant eccentrics but may be grouped into the following relational categories:

i. Women and Madness
ii. Women and Speech
iii. Women and Courage
iv. Women and Music

(i) Women and Madness: Lear’s poems abound with women who display abnormal eccentricities – or are even completely ‘mad’. The most striking – and probably the most dismal of his works – is one of the longer poems, titled Miss Maniac (Lear 23–40). While this cannot be classified as one of his Nonsense poems, it reveals a highly sensitive mind, deeply aware of the feminine predicament and the psychic environment of someone who is driven over the edge.

Around my brain there is a chain, and o’er my fevered soul
A darkness like that solemn gloom which once through Egypt stole;
Sometimes I feel, but know not why, a fire within me burns,
And visions fierce and terrible pursue where’er I turn; (Lear 23)

The poem, goes on to narrate the story of a woman ostracised by her father, family and society, on account of a love affair that did not fulfil the societal eventuality of achieving the master signifier ‘marriage’ and left the woman with a lovechild. Being driven from home, lovelorn and grief-stricken, the woman’s mind snaps and she becomes deranged. Lear traces the moment with exceptional insight:

Strange feelings, such as none but maniacs ever know or feel,
Rushed indistinctly on my mind, and reason seemed to reel,

95 A fifth category of ‘Woman as Bodies’ I shall discuss later in this chapter (pp. 319-26).
Till, lost in unknown agony, I laughed as if in mirth,
Or shudd’ring – welcomed back the gloom of hell begun on earth:
Then madness first his scorching hand held o’er my withered brain –
Ah-ha!– it was a deadly touch – but it never cooled again! (Lear 38-40)

Lear’s parallel illustrations are quite antithetical here, and often contradict the sentiment and pathos of this tragic narrative. Miss Maniac refers to her broken love affair as “the bubble pleasure burst” and Lear supports it with the image of a Victorian Lady blowing bubbles from a pipe; When she claims that she was beautiful in her youth, Lear depicts an image of a woman who would definitely not be considered beautiful by common aesthetic parameters with a glum and pinched face and an excess of flowers and vegetation stuck in her hair. Despite the surfacing of his irrepressible penchant for paradox, the poem is a sad one and shows the position of a middle class woman abandoned in a patriarchal world, having broken the laws that were made by men.

In general, though, the men in Lear’s poems outnumber the women. In his limericks, some eccentric women have disastrous ends. An excess of conformity leads a woman to destroy herself:

There was an Old Lady of Chertsey
Who made a remarkable curtsey;
She twirled round and round, till she sunk underground,
Which distressed all the people of Chertsey. (Lear 161)

There was a Young Person of Kew,
Whose virtues and vices were few;
But with blameable haste, she devoured some hot paste,
Which destroyed that Young Person of Kew. (Lear 360)
Several of the female characters turn their nose up at society, defying the stereotype and mocking tradition much to the chagrin of ‘they’ – the others:

There was a Young Lady of Lucca,
Whose lovers completely forsook her;
She ran up a tree, and said, 'Fiddle-de-dee!'
Which embarrassed the people of Lucca. (Lear 169)

Some of the women even resort to violence. One of the clearest references in his lyrics, is to Helen of Troy. While the flies could be a symbol of the hundreds of men clamouring to marry her, the violence is a typical Learian twist to an ancient tale:

There was a Young Lady of Troy,
Whom several large flies did annoy;
Some she killed with a thump, some she drowned at the pump,
And some she took with her to Troy. (Lear 88)

Lear shatters the Victorian stereotype of the female as an angel by making violence a way with several of the women in his poems.

There was a Young Person of Smyrna,
Whose Grandmother threatened to burn her;
But she seized on the Cat, and said, ‘Granny, burn that! You incongruous Old Woman of Smyrna!’ (Lear 159)

One of the most violent women of his limericks, Lear merely calls ‘impulsive’ (Lear 376). In sum then, it can be said, that Edward Lear has created several female characters in his limericks which, in the garb of Nonsense, serve to dismantle the bourgeois Victorian image of a woman by assigning to her behavioural characteristics that are bizarre or funny. At the same time, through these poems, he shows us how ‘they’ quickly jump to conclusions
about women, who do not have the power to name themselves. The other of the female – the patriarchal ‘they’ – decides what kinds of women are ‘mad’ and who are sane.

(ii) **Women and Speech:** Lear shows us how, in a male universe, talkative women are silenced before their lack of words can be misconstrued. “They” try to hush the Russian lady who screams:

There was a Young Lady of Russia,
Who screamed so that no one could hush her;
Her screams were extreme, no one heard such a scream
As was screamed by that Lady from Russia. (Lear 106)

On the other hand, a woman, once silenced, must be made to speak, but in pre-set ways. Her silence is threatening and must be broken:

There was a Young Lady of Parma,
Whose conduct grew calmer and calmer;
...When they said ‘Are you dumb?’ she merely said, ‘Hum!’
That provoking Young Lady of Parma. (Lear 106)

Women who speak too much are guilty of *lalangue* and thus are likely to be deified, if not silenced. Thus if their language is “horribly vague”, they may be deemed “oracular”:

There was an Old Lady of Prague,
Whose language was horribly vague;
When they said, "Are these caps?" She answered, "Perhaps!"
That oracular Lady of Prague. (Lear 105)

Lear’s understanding of the eyes of women predicts the feminist theorisation of the Male Gaze:
There was a young lady whose eyes,
Were unique as to colour and size;
When she opened them wide, people all turned aside,
And started away in surprise. (Lear 75)

The Gaze, a prerogative of the male, is used as a phallic instrument of oppression and possession by the male, upon the female. However, it is the return of the gaze that creates castration anxiety in the male, which is why ‘people’ turn aside and start away when the young lady opens her eyes wide.

(iii) Women and Courage: Many female characters of Lear’s limericks are capable of outstanding achievements of skill and courage – though they sometimes border on the bizarre. The aunt of a Young Girl from Majorca walks seventy miles (107); A Young Lady of Norway is ‘courageous’ and unaffected after being squashed flat by a door (89). Another one, tackles a bull:

There was a Young Lady of Hull,
Who was chased by a virulent Bull;
But she seized on a spade and called out – ‘Who’s afraid!’
Which distracted that virulent Bull. (Lear 84)

If Carroll was the first British writer to make a little girl the central protagonist of a novel, Lear was the first to bring to centre stage women, who, though bizarre, took charge of their lives and cared little about society or its reactions.

(iv) Women and Music: A remarkable number of female characters in Lear’s lyrics are found to be playing upon musical instruments. These lyrics show the women to be accomplished and receiving praise, while presenting an image of the bourgeois woman using her leisure time to garner those accomplishments that domestic pigeon-holing permits. In the
following limerick, Lear’s young lady also excels in fishing, traditionally a masculine activity:

There was a Young Lady of Welling,
Whose praise all the world was a-telling;
She played on the harp, and caught several carp,
That accomplished Young Lady of Welling. (Lear 104)

A Young Lady of Tyre enraptures the city dwellers by playing the lyre (83), and another one with a chin like a pin, sharpens it and plays several tunes on a harp using her chin (Lear 162). Playing a musical instrument was a commonly accepted pastime for the sequestered bourgeois women of the time and most young girls were trained to play at least one at an early age, to improve their chances of marriage:

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many musically inclined single women moved beyond this genteel musical education to refine and broaden their skills at conservatories and music academies whose numbers grew with student enrolments that were, not surprisingly, in great majority female. This development reflected both the strong contemporary interest in music as well as the need, perceived by parents and daughter, for “something to do” between secondary school and marriage; those who foresaw the possibility of a future that did not include marriage. . . would benefit by developing skills that might later provide a means for earning income. (Gillett 35)

Lear transforms and subverts even this common pastime by presenting unladylike ways of performing a very ladylike action. One of the ladies plays the harp, but the picture of typical femininity is overturned by the fact that she plays it with her chin instead of her fingers:
Fig. 5.2. “There was a Young Lady whose chin” from Edward Lear, *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense* (London: Penguin, 2000; print; 162).

There was a Young Lady whose chin,
Resembled the point of a pin;
So she had it made sharp, and purchased a harp,
And played several tunes with her chin. (Lear 162)

Gentility is mocked when a Young Lady decides to play the flute to animals instead of a drawing room full of applauding humans:

Fig. 5.3. “There was a Young Lady of Bute,” from Edward Lear, *Edward Lear: The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense* (London: Penguin, 2000; print; 73).
Lear, Carroll and the Female Body

The Victorian woman was plagued by a body dysmorphia — an effect of her age and culture that pushed her into self-objectification as never before. This visual amplification of the female form was a consequence of several factors:

Britain, during the Victorian age, was the richest country in the world, supplying goods to most of the Western world by draining resources in raw materials and labour from its colonies. “Britain’s gross national income expanded from £523.3 million in 1851 to £916.6 million in 1871” (Talairach-Vielmas 5). The rise in wealth benefited the middle class greatly. The combination of wealth and leisure made consumers of bourgeois women. Places like the West End of London became a place for women to get together and shop.

No longer solely seen as a child-rearing figure, the ideal wife was reshaped into a perfect lady, ‘ornamental, leisured and expensive.’ As a result, constantly reified, extolled as an art curio connoting the wealth of its owner, the fashionably corseted Victorian woman was also girdled by discourses at pains to define her. In the streets or in women’s magazines, advertisements aimed at women and constructed women as desiring and consuming subjects. In so doing, they simultaneously led them to become merchandise themselves – thereby confining them within a role as reflector of male power, exhibiting their fathers’ or husbands’ economic success. (Talairach-Vielmas 6)
Thus began the dysmorphic psychic condition of the Western woman, constantly preoccupied with her dress, hair, beauty and appearance.

No one understood the Victorian concept of beauty better than Lear and Carroll, both being disadvantaged aesthetically in the stereotypical sense. Martin Gardner’s verbal sketch is unflattering and lists a range of deformities that Lewis Carroll’s handsome face would have failed to compensate for:

In appearance Carroll was handsome and asymmetric – two facts that may have contributed to his interest in mirror reflections. One shoulder was higher than the other, his smile was slightly askew, and the level of his blue eyes not quite the same. He was of moderate height thin, carrying himself stiffly erect and walking with a peculiar jerky gait. He was afflicted with one deaf ear and a stammer that trembled his upper lip. (Gardner AA 10)

His students “later nickname him ‘Louisa Caroline’ in mockery of his effeminate manner” (Talbot 66).

Lear was always self-conscious of his appearance and perceived himself as “the Dong with a luminous nose.” As a child, he was “a rather ugly short-sighted, affectionate little boy” (Noakes Wanderer 7) and at the age of twenty, he was a “tall, rather ugly, bespectacled young man” (Noakes Wanderer 20). Describing a self-portrait he had made at that age, in October 1831, Lear wrote:

... this is amazingly like: add only – that both my knees are fractured from being run over which had made them peculiarly crooked – that my neck is singularly long, a most elephantine nose – and a disposition to be half blind, and you may very well imagine my tout ensemble. (Noakes Wanderer 272–3)
Lear and Carroll, thus, were acutely aware of an unappealing and deformed anatomy and preoccupied with their bodies – a symptom of body dysmorphia. They were, therefore, empathetic to the feminine Victorian predicament – a fact that can be seen in their works.

One of Lewis Carroll’s photographs of a little girl named Irene Macdonald, titled *It Won’t Come Smooth* (July 1863), shows the female protagonist holding up a mirror to her face but refusing to brush her hair. The picture “hovers in uncertainty – poised between revolt and suffering – with the female body placed at the heart of the photograph’s concerns” (Talairach-Vielmas 5) – and “questions femininity, hovering here between assertion and objectification” (ibid.). The picture reflects Carroll’s empathy with the feminine and insight into the visual objectification of female anatomy. A very clear parallel is visible in the figure of the White Queen, whose hairbrush is perennially stuck in her hair.

The famously ugly Duchess whose physical features in the illustration by Tenniel were borrowed from a Sixteenth Century painting by Quintin Matsys, is conspicuous in her ugliness – an ‘ugliness’ that is characterised by a masculinity of facial features and says much about Carroll’s concept of beauty. Carroll himself comments that “Alice did not much like her keeping so close to her: first because the Duchess was very ugly. . .“ (*AA* 120). By inference, it can be said that Carroll preferred the feminine stereotype of beauty rather than the masculine.

But while Carroll mentions ugliness as a thing to evade, Lear often creates characters who revel in their anatomical difference. Lear’s eccentrics have a plethora of deformations that are not necessarily detrimental to themselves. The Lady with a sharp chin (akin to the Duchess’) uses it to play a harp (Lear 162), the Old man in a barge uses his large nose to support a light while fishing at night (Lear 333), the Old Person of Cassell is perfectly contented with a nose that ends in a tassel, and another Old Man defies all of society for his
long nose (Lear 158). A young lady hires an Old Lady to carry her excessively long nose – which demonstrates her comfort at being shaped differently from others (Lear 91).

Alice’s repeated changes in proportion are a reflection of the Victorian female’s obsession with physical appearance. To begin with, in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, no size is correct – either she is too large (for the door) or too small (to reach the key on the top of the table). She becomes a monster in size several times in the book – first in the Rabbit’s house (Chapter IV), then in the forest, where a pigeon mistakes her for a serpent (Chapter V) and finally in the courtroom where she upsets the entire jury box and its inmates (Chapter XII). She is always too small or too large – a sign of the problem of body self-image that women worry about to this day. Perhaps the source of women’s preoccupation with their appearance may be found in the Lacanian-feminist observation that the Symbolic Order is phallic (and therefore, society as a whole is phallogocentric). Women are thus left with no space free of male influence except for the pre-symbolic – specifically, the Imaginary Order.

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Lacan’s concept of the Mirror Stage describes how the little child, before learning language, for the first time perceives a difference between self and other. “Relations between self and other thus govern the imaginary order. This is the domain in which the self is dominated by images of the other and seeks its identity in a reflected relation with alterity” (Grosz 46). In case of the female child, the alterity is truly radical. “If the mirror stage detaches the child from its lived experiences of fragmentation, the specular image provides it with a representation or substitute that is based on wholeness and unity” (Grosz 156). This representation is constituted by a false “wholeness and unity” – a completeness of body-image that is rendered, in my opinion, all the more inaccessible for the female child by the fact that it is presented to her by a male other. The trauma deepens as she grows, for she must not only perceive the difference between herself and others but also continuously see herself as others do, live in a perpetual double vision and objectify herself at
the same time that she is turning into a subject. Perhaps the female's body-consciousness is based on the fact that she can never fit her own body-image because the image is not hers but a fabricated one that is handed to her by a phallic society. Small wonder, then, that women are often preoccupied with their own bodies and frequently feel discontented with their appearance:

There was a Young Person of Crete,
Whose toilette was far from complete;
She dressed in a sack spickle-speckled with black,
That ombliferous Person of Crete. (Lear 164)

In a world where the male gaze is omnipresent, a woman's toilette is always “far from complete.” The following conversation between the Caterpillar and Alice seems to summarise the female predicament:

“What size do you want to be?” it asked.

“Oh, I'm not particular as to size,” Alice hastily replied; “only one doesn’t like changing so often, you know.”

“I don't know,” said the Caterpillar.

Alice said nothing: she had never been so much contradicted in all her life before, and she felt that he was losing her temper.

“Are you content now?” said the Caterpillar.

“Well I should like to be a little larger, Sir if you wouldn’t mind,” said Alice: “three inches is such a wretched height to be.”

“It is a very good height indeed!” said the Caterpillar angrily, rearing itself upright as it spoke (it was exactly three inches high). (AA 72)
Several lines in this dialogue are significant. (a) It is Alice who says that she is not generally particular about size but dislikes the repeated changes. A growing girl child realises that no size is good enough and she must keep changing her appearance to keep up with the varying demands of the male gaze. (b) The Caterpillar’s retort that he doesn’t know what Alice is talking about couldn’t be more honest – what does a man know about the bodily inconveniences he puts a female through? (c) The Caterpillar’s question (“Are you content now?”) is a typical way of phrasing the question to the woman as if her dissatisfaction with her own body is all her fault – that women are, by nature, perpetually discontented and there’s no pleasing them. (d) Finally, the Caterpillar is offended when Alice says that “three inches is such a wretched height to be” – precisely because he is three inches tall. Typically, the male of the species looks for an image of himself, since the female form increases his castration anxiety. The male perpetually compares the other to himself, keeping himself as the primary parameter and always expecting the female to be like him or inferior – so that, in the end, there is no difference, only “a hommo-sexuality in which woman will be involved in specularizing the phallus” (Irigaray Speculum 103) and “the little girl is (only) a little boy” (Irigaray Speculum 25). The Caterpillar is offended because he is always the right size and Alice should be perfectly contented being like him.

Most chapters of the Alice books and several of Lear’s limericks are isolated pockets of patriarchal power, microcosms of male manipulations. Alice is badgered, questioned, corrected and insulted by a whole lot of predominantly male characters the principal of which are the Caterpillar, the Gryphon, the Kings and Humpty Dumpty. It doesn’t matter what she does and it doesn’t matter how she looks, for she is always weird in this patriarchal world. The Unicom is befuddled on seeing Alice:

“What – is – this!” he said at last.

“This is a child!” Haigha replied . . .
“We only found it today. It’s as large as life, and twice as natural.”

“I always thought they were fabulous monsters!” said the Unicorn. “Is it alive?”

(TTLG 287)

The little girl found herself objectified as much as the grown up woman found herself commodified. The Victorian woman was always over dressed but never felt dressed enough; like the White Queen, whose shawl is never straight. What the woman wore seemed to be less to please herself and more to please a particular dress code that could not be managed however many pins she used.

Alice herself goes through an acculturation that reflects the many ways in which women are hammered into propriety. She learns to drink just enough and eat just right, nibbling on the mushroom to adjust herself to new parameters. It is a “training in femininity” (Talairach-Vielmas 70) – a training that perhaps, the White Queen has yet to learn from – and which is what makes her dismal, dishevelled, out-of-place and distressed. Carroll’s fastidiousness about dress extended from his person to Alice. Tenniel had first drawn Alice in Crinoline – a stiffened petticoat – and Carroll was dissatisfied with the look. He asked Tenniel to “change the balloon rings for a more fashionable period dress” (Talairach-Vielmas 62).

Drawmer (2004) believes that “the character of Alice serves as a repository for male anxieties about female sexuality and latent desire actually inscribed upon the transforming body” (Drawmer 281). It seems to me that a more likely explanation is that, perhaps, Carroll viewed his childhood self as feminine (Robson 139) because his works simultaneously display a longing for a return to childhood, and a violent rejection of all children that happen to be male. For Carroll, as well as Lear, the parameters of beauty and ugliness were oppressive and exclusive. They, therefore, used their Nonsense texts to reveal the myriad
ways in which physical aberrations are viewed and critique the Victorian aesthetic biases that cornered women, children and feminine men, more than anyone else.

The Unbearable *Unheimlich of Being*

The feeling of not-feeling-at-home is one that a woman must learn to bear from childhood. Patriarchal spaces are oppressive to women. They render women uncomfortable and passive, plaguing them with a feeling of the uncanny (Freud’s *Unheimlich*) – an unnameable sense of suffocation which they cannot escape because there is no outside space.

A woman must fade into the domestic background – both in terms of physical and textual presence – must fit herself into the gaps of a masculine world, accommodate her words between the words, be the ‘it’ that Alice is often reduced to, obliterate her presence between the rooms of her home, inter herself, as it were, between the texts of the masculine world. Unable to feel at home in her own home, she is forced to reduce herself to nothing, diffusing herself into the walls because she has no room of her own. But even the walls are man-made after all – and patriarchal walls have years – a history that she cannot battle. Woman is not merely intertextual but banished into an interred-textuality, to be content between walls, caught between whiles and by the wiles of male omnipresence.

In Lear’s limericks, also, the women are typically ‘out-of-place.’ Whenever they attempt to transgress their boundaries, leave their native places to escape the unholiness of home, they are somehow impelled to return, being censured or finding themselves more ‘spaced-out’ elsewhere than at home. In the end, the outside world is too hostile for them to deal with. Often a woman must take the lesser of the two evils, preferring to face the known enemies within the four walls. The last lines of the following limericks are significant in this regard:
There was a Young Lady of Sweden,
Who went by the slow train to Weedon;
When they cried, "Weedon Station!" she made no observation,
But thought she should go back to Sweden. (Lear 89)

There was a Young Lady of Dorking,
Who bought a large bonnet for walking;
But its colour and size, so bedazzled her eyes,
That she very soon went back to Dorking. (Lear 96)

There was a Young lady of Portugal,
Whose ideas were excessively nautical;
She climbed up a tree, to examine the sea,
But declared she would never leave Portugal. (Lear 163)

Alice too, is walled in, interred into in-between spaces, throughout the Alice books. Alice falls through a tunnel. She is then faced by a corridor, a panorama of nondescript doors – a space that isn’t a space per se, a non-dwelling, interim, frightening length of space. As Caroline Dionne indicates, “a tower is the same as a tunnel . . . when time is removed from space – like in basement spaces lit by artificial light (the first space into which Alice evolves after falling down slowly in the tunnel) . . . space becomes frightening as if it was created by something overwhelming and horrifying – something entirely other. Progressively, Alice returns to the surface, reconquers space and time and creates spaces that allow for things to happen – in between spaces.” (Dionne 4–5)

A woman is, therefore, forced to learn to master (!) the in-between spaces, create the freedoms within walls wherein patriarchy has no control. Thus, even though Alice is constantly confronted by innumerable patriarchal others-supposed-to-know, and is made to
question which dreamed it, she eventually gains control over her existence by snatching herself back from the dreams at the end of both books, like a spool of thread in a cosmic *fort-da* game; for it is, after all, her own dream and she may choose to do whatever she pleases when she feels that it has gone way beyond her control. The true *Alice* is visible in Tenniel’s visualisation of her — straight-faced, determined, stoical, and revealing none of the coy bewilderment of the typical feminine stereotype. Alice is Carroll’s non-feminine hero, his version of a feminist who, instead of fighting for the right to vote in a hegemonic system of organised injustice, chooses to vote out entirely and wipes out the whole lot of interrogators she had faced by a simple decision of her own. Alice, then, is the first feminist hero of children’s literature.

**A Feminine Ending**

I have, in this chapter, traced the socio-political position of women in the Victorian Age and attempted to show how Lear and Carroll have, in their Nonsense works (and illustrations) attempted to subvert the general perception of women in their own unique ways. The Victorian woman had no voting rights and was surrounded by pseudo-scientific statements of ‘truth’ that dismissed her as weak, immature and helpless. This stereotypical perception of the woman gained its truth value by the contrasting the housewife (the ‘angel in the house’) with the prostitute — both tied up in fabricated discourses that enabled patriarchal hegemony to stay in place. Lear and Carroll attempt to alter these perceptions of women by bringing into the mainstream a feminine genre — i.e. the genre of Nonsense. Nonsense is feminine since (a) it has traditionally been excluded from ‘serious’ patriarchal systems of education (b) it speaks the voice of the Semiotic (in Kristevan terms) and (c) is characterised by Irigaray’s

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96 In the rules of poetic tradition, a feminine ending is when the last syllable of a line in a verse is unstressed. Thus, I end this chapter without emphasis, summarising it in a few points, which, by no means replace the content of it.
qualities of ‘feminine style’: fluidity, tactility and simultaneity. Besides, Nonsense also
creates an alternative space from which femininity may find its voice, for patriarchy tends to
exclude the irrational as feminine (and the feminine as irrational).

To sum up, the Nonsense works of Lear and Carroll do not simply play language games.
It is not merely that they provide intuitive insights into post-structuralist theories of language
or the workings of the psyche. They also seem to analyse the position of the female and the
feminine, paradoxically in an ultra-macho and politically masculine age, using the disguise of
Nonsense and humour to question the gender biases of their time. The works of Edward Lear
and Lewis Carroll heralded the beginning of a new kind of non-masculine writing. They, for
the first time, brought the female (and all that had been marginalised as ‘feminine’) on to
centre stage and presented to the world, the *écriture féminine* that post-structuralist feminists
were to aspire to more than a century later.97

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97 Hélène Cixous (b. 1937) recommended an “*écriture féminine*” to try and circumvent
patriarchal language because “Woman must write her self: must write about women and
bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their
bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put
herself into her text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.” (Cixous
27)