

The Other Carroll Myth

By Arne Moll

Is Tim Burton's recent 3D-movie *Alice in Wonderland* exposing a new 'Carroll myth'? Many movie reviewers around the world have condemned Burton's 'bombastic and moralistic Alice of the Rings' for its commercialism and lack of 'Carrollian' authenticity. Sure enough, Burton's Alice is not to everyone's taste, but at the same time these reviewers seem blissfully unaware of Lewis Carroll's real-life love for Victorian tradition, morals - and for his commercial talents.

One of the most often-heard complaints is the movie's all-too-obvious good vs. evil plotline. At blogcritics.org, for instance, reviewer Adam Blair writes: "Tim Burton and the film's screenwriter, Linda Woolverton, made a huge mistake in turning this Alice film into a battle between good and evil." And In *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody writes that "the story has been transformed into a standard-issue lesson in empowering young women to make their own choices in life."

In a review for the influential Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland*, reviewer Kees Driessen even goes a few steps further: "Worst of all, Burton wants Alice to learn something - but Carroll's books consistently ridiculed all forms of lessons, schools and moralism. And what, precisely, must Alice learn? That there's good and evil in the world, and that you must choose between those two things and believe in yourself, that you can achieve anything you want. Are you still there?"

Slate Magazine's Dana Stevens complains that "Lewis Carroll's eminently sensible British schoolchild has been taken on a shopping spree at Hot Topic (an experience that viewers are invited to share by donning the line of tie-in merchandise available for purchase at that teen-Goth chain), and the resulting makeover doesn't do her any favors."

Yet despite these roaring statements, one wonders: isn't the original Alice's Adventures in Wonderland also, in a way, a battle between the good (Alice) and the bad (various characters, especially the Queen of Hearts)? Did Carroll's books really 'consistently ridicule' all forms of moralism? Would the Rev. Charles Dodgson have 'abhorred' Burton's commercialized 'Alice'? How would he actually feel about 'empowering young women'?

An abundance of tiresome moralism is perhaps one of the chief reasons why Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* books are hardly read anymore these days. Even the Alice books are full of moralism and 'life lessons', albeit often in brilliantly disguised form. Anyone who has taken the time to read Lewis Carroll's thousands of letters and diary entries knows that the historical Charles Dodgson wasn't only a witty mathematician, a 'mad hatter' who singlehandedly invented nonsense literature, proclaiming some kind of anarchism-for-kids.

He was also a deeply religious, traditionally-minded Victorian with a fond preference for melodrama, 'kitsch' and what many critics would nowadays no doubt call 'poor taste'. In her recent Carroll biography *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll* (2010), Jenny Woolf drives the point home:

In 1867, a typical evening out for Carroll at the New Royalty Theatre featured 'Meg's Diversion', 'Sarah's Young Man' and 'The Latest Edition of Black Eyed Susan'. Carroll enjoyed these very much, and claimed in his diary that the latter was 'a good burlesque in which a song (and dance for five) "Pretty Susan, don't say No" was encored four times!"

Moreover, Carroll had a keen commercial eye for marketing his own books and indeed all sorts of Alice-related products which would make any modern-day marketing trainee proud. Interestingly, as Woolf points out, many of these theatrical performances were 'probably not too warmly received' at his parent's home, since his father's High Church beliefs - which he respected very much indeed - obviously contradicted attending such plays. It's this kind of paradoxes that makes Carroll's personality so fascinating and

enigmatic, yet it is precisely this aspect of Carroll that most critics seem to ignore altogether.

I should make clear this is not about defending Tim Burton's movie against sometimes well-founded criticism. There's much in the movie that seems out of place or ill-considered. But the appeal that many reviewers make to the 'core message' of the Alice books - and particularly Carroll's oeuvre in general - seems out of place. Instead of accusing Burton of being "not much interested in Alice" (New York Times), perhaps these reviewers should have bothered to check whether their assumptions about the Alice-books or the real Lewis Carroll himself were actually based on facts.

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**And, though the shadow of a sigh
May tremble through the story
For 'happy summer days' gone by,
And vanish'd summer glory -
It shall not touch with breath of bale,
The pleasance of our fairy-tale.**

The problem, of course, isn't that the Alice books are not full of brilliant, nonsensical and chaos-inducing fun - and that we shouldn't love them for all that. The problem is that Carroll's work and personality were much too complex and many-sided to take any radical point of view in discussing Carroll-related matters. I think the right attitude towards projects such as Burton's interpretation is one of strong ambivalence.

Yes, the Alice books are generally delightfully amoralistic, frivolous tales - yet much of his other works are not. Yes, the Alice books are full of fun, wit and great language-jokes - but they also contain many death-jokes and some scenes are rather dark and gloomy for children's books (something Burton understood quite well, it seems.) Yes, Carroll wrote highly original letters to child friends celebrating their innocent childhood - but he also in his diary begged the Lord for forgiveness for unmentioned 'sins' numerous times, and he struggled immensely with his own career and 'path of life' at Christ Church, Oxford.

It seems to me many reviewers and superficial Lewis Carroll-enthusiasts tend to ignore Carroll's 'other side' - just like Carroll-publicists have for almost a century ignored the possibility that Carroll was not at all some shy don with an unhealthy appetite for little girls, but was in many ways a worldly Victorian who might have had normal affairs with normal, grown-up women. You can oppose some of Burton's choices and reason your way towards a particular perspective, but at the same time you can reason your way towards the exact opposite view - with equally reasonable arguments!

This, then, is the second 'Carroll myth' that may be in the making as we speak: the idea that Carroll was only the brilliant inventor of the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat, and not the author who made Bruno 'love the entire world' and the man who, as Woolf notes in her book, "annoyed, upset and irritated his actor friends on the morality of the plays in which they appeared".

The *Vrij Nederland* reviewer mentioned above, ends his piece expressing his fear that 'there will be an entire generation who thinks [Tim Burton's version] is the only real Alice in Wonderland.' He may be right, but likewise it is my fear that there will be an entire generation who thinks the exact opposite. Both points of view, taken separately, are, in my opinion, equally wrong