

A Case of Mistaken Identity

by John Tufail

Every reader of 'Alice in Wonderland' makes the assumption that at the Trial (supposedly of the Knave of Hearts) the prisoner before the court actually is the knave of hearts! This is a reasonable assumption. It is based on a number of textual and extra textual (illustrative) evidences, pre-knowledge of the nursery rhyme in question (but we all know how gleefully Carroll messed around with nursery rhymes!), the consequent contextual relationship of certain key characters (the King and Queen of Hearts) who stand in the position of accusers and, centrally, the two illustrations of the trial with their dominant Heart symbols.

Have you noticed that nowhere in the text (during the trial or elsewhere) is the prisoner before the court referred to, directly or indirectly, as the Knave of Hearts. The fact that the IDENTITY of the prisoner is never queried by the reader is due to an accumulation of hints and associative allusions by the narrator, as in the garden scene with the King and the Queen of Hearts and the "Knave". Not the least of these allusions is the frontispiece - a full page illustration dominating the reader's consciousness from the outset. You've been set up to believe! (Have you ever wondered, by the way, why Carroll insisted on having TOTAL control over his illustrators - in much the same way as Dickens and Thackeray?). It is only when the illustration is examined closely (and who does that? - Carroll is nothing if not subtle) that it can be seen that of all the characters illustrated in this story, the Knave is the only one whose identity is always ambiguous. In none of the illustrations of the Knave (there are three) is he ever unambiguously represented. **He is NEVER shown sporting a Heart motif. Indeed, on the frontispiece the predominant motif shown on the Knave's tunic is the Club!**



There are few better examples of the dangers inherent in accepting at face value the 'evidentiary' properties of illustration. In fact, what Carroll, quite deliberately and obviously is doing here is to undermine the nonsense element of the Trial because if, as the illustration SHOWS, the person before the court is NOT the Knave of Hearts, much of the proceedings - especially the evidence given by the various witnesses, actually makes sense. What Carroll is doing is playing with the reader's sense of expectation. The reader's 'reading' of the illustration is determined by his or her's own expectations. First, the existence of the nursery rhyme. A nursery rhyme is an enclosed reality. The Knave of Hearts is guilty because the nursery rhyme says he is - the Knave of Hearts has no existence outside this. But we all know what Carroll's views on nursery rhymes are! Witness 'Twinkle, twinkle little bat!' for example!

So we should expect that Carroll would play some sort of semiological game with the key element of 'Alice' - the trial, but what we don't expect is that he would do it in such a subtle manner, because most authors like to let the reader in on the secret at some stage. Sadly for the reader Carroll is not most authors! He is a logician with a fine and personal sense of humour. To Carroll, the longer the joke remains private, the better the joke.

Semiology: The philosophical theory and study of the functions of signs and symbols.

In most illustrated books the illustrations complement the text, the reader glances at the illustration to 'confirm' the textual content. But this is not always the case. In 19th c. literature, for example, the illustration became a powerful tool for writers such as Thackeray ('Vanity Fair') and Dickens (Notably 'Domby and Son') to evade the 'universal censor' on such issues as adultery - or even to undermine the written text. Semiology was not a 20th century invention!

In fact it is really only in the 20th century that illustration has become a passive partner to the text.

In 'Alice' the frontispiece refers not out of the text to a universe of playing cards and nursery rhymes (Carroll, of course, invented neither) but back into the body of a verbal text which is deliberately ambiguous. The illustration carries an information structure which highlights the ambiguity of the written text and challenges the reader's reliance on his/her knowledge of the nursery rhyme. What we have are two complex but incomplete structures which are mapped onto each other in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure. It is what Douglas Hofstadter would call an 'isomorphic relationship'. However, because the reader has already made an assumption about the trial based on the nursery rhyme, he or she completely misses the point that the trial is 'nonsense' not because of the evidence given but because the person in the dock is not the Knave of Hearts!

isomorphic: Having similar appearance but basically different.

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