

**DECADENT IDEAS IN LEWIS
CARROLL:
Victorian Morality through the
'Golden Age'**

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Abstract

The purpose of this Masters dissertation is to explore how subversive literature exercises commentary through cultural trends. To do this, I will compare the public fascination with aesthetic “Beauty” in the Decadent Movement and the infatuation with “the Child” in the Golden Age of children’s literature. Although it is well known that Decadence was a diversion to call upon greater political changes, I will argue that Lewis Carroll employs the same Decadent scheme, twenty-five years prior to the age. I will be considering fairy tales from ‘the soul of Decadence’, Oscar Wilde, and the pioneer of the Golden Age, Lewis Carroll – linking the authors in their mutual affinity for justice.¹ Thus, in pursuit of egalitarian ideals, Wilde and Carroll conservatively yield to the public fashions of aesthetics and new perceptions of the Child, but simultaneously question the morality of the society on which they’re built.

¹ Magali, Fleurot, ‘Decadence and Regeneration: Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales as a Tool for Social Change’ in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, eds. by Marja Harmanmaa, and Christopher Nissen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 73.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

Introduction – Decadence and the Golden Age

At the end of the nineteenth century, Victorian culture experienced an interest in art aesthetics. Known as the Aesthetic Movement (1870), this period advocated art as the purest form of truth. All things beautiful, visually pleasing, and sensually empowering were revered for their attractive nature. The new appreciation of art focused more on form rather than content, and the mantra ‘art for art’s sake’ was born in its endeavor to capture its priceless quality. But art’s triviality soon allowed a smaller group of revolutionaries to capitalize on its loosely confined structures.

By the 1880s, Aestheticism had unintentionally birthed a small period of flamboyant aesthetic enthusiasm called the ‘Decadent Movement’. This fleeting age, often discussed in abstract terms and considered ‘more of a mood than a movement’, pointed directly at young, unabashed soul-seekers who sought to live life as an art form in itself.² Through fine foods, long walks, and other cursory pleasures, the Decadent lived as extravagantly as he pleased. Flaunting pleasures and ignoring societal norms, he became defined as ‘any young writer who scorned traditional literary standards, who delighted in the perverse and the artificial, who sought to extend the boundaries of emotional aesthetic experience’ (Cevasco, 19). Their erratic and self-indulging nature was considered distasteful nevertheless the influence of Aestheticism was still powerful through culture.

Although the Decadents were controversial members of the Victorian community, cultural fascination with “the beautiful” was deeply embedded in society. In addition to this, as an 1892 article states, the Decadents were only a small group of ‘strange young men’ excused as ‘dreamers and visionaries’.³ Somewhat “meaningless” themselves, Decadents had little gravity in society, but mystified the public with their soulful devotion to the aesthetic lifestyle. Regardless of Decadents’ immoral impulses or radical art, the public considered their actions a poetic search for some vain ostensible truth – though ‘nobody [knew] what’ (Watson, 9).

Their mystery as well as their extreme devotion to artistic experience caused more

² Cevasco, G. A., ‘Decadence’ in *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.K. Husymans’s A Rebours and English Literature* (New York, NY: AMS Press, 2001), 24.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

³ Watson, Thomas J., ‘What is Fin de Siecle?’, *The Art Critic*, 1.1 (1893), 9.

intrigue than suspicion. Ironically, it was this curiosity that allowed the Decadents an opening to produce more subversive literature. The cultural infatuation with "Beauty" that Decadent writers so boldly embraced became a distraction, a ploy through which the legitimacy of Victorian ethics were critiqued and ridiculed. This is something Arthur Symons calls to attention in his book *The Symbolist Movement* (1899): 'The interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while something more serious was in preparation.'⁴

Identifying Decadence as a 'mock-interlude' that 'divert[s] the attention of the critics' questions its reliability. It doubts the intentions behind the era, as well as the intentions of the people who created it. Generally, 'Aestheticism [...] implied attitudes rather than forms of behavior; but Decadence intimated abandonment of morality and spiritual depravity' (Cevasco, 29). In time, Decadents were recognized as corrupters of social systems, a 'cult' vainly in search of a shameless lifestyle (Cevasco, 19).

In many ways the 'Golden Age' episode of children's literature in the mid-nineteenth century mirrors that period. This short phase of prolific children's fiction revolutionized the didactic children's story into meaningless worlds of fantasy. It is a period I will cautiously bracket between the 1860s and the 1900s, and like Decadence, the Golden Age "'movement'" was one that quickly arose and 'petered out rather than [coming] to an abrupt end'.⁵ It was a phenomenon of culture, a feeling rather than a motion.

Just as the Decadent Movement was a manifestation of Aestheticism, the Golden Age also blossomed from a preexisting trend. At the time, there was a drastic shift from Evangelic to Romantic ideals of the child, encouraging a 'need to love and understand [children] rather than beat them into submission'.⁶ This new appreciation for children is what ultimately begins a cultural interest in children's literature.

⁴ Symons, Arthur, 'Introduction' in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York, NY: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1971), 7.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

⁵ Carpenter, Humphrey, 'Epilogue: The Garden Revisited' in *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 210.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

⁶ Douglas-Fairhurst, Robert, *The Story of Alice: Lewis Carroll and the Secret History of Wonderland* (London: Vintage, 2016), 330.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

But this vibrant period was also considered with deprecation. The Golden Age's 'celebration of childhood was especially vulnerable to mockery' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 115) in the same way that Decadence's celebration of "Beauty" 'was usually hurled as a reproach'.⁷

Moreover, due to harsh perceptions of the Golden Age, anyone affiliated with the idea of the innocent child was criticized as well. In Marah Gubar's book *Artful Dodgers*, she discusses the young men who initiated the movement of "child-friends". Authors like Lewis Carroll and J.M. Barrie had particular interest in young children, using them as muses for their fairy tales. Their fascination with the naivety of the child greatly contrasts original thought: 'the relatively new concept of the child as an innocent, helpless Other clashed most dramatically with an older version of the child as an adult in the making.'⁸ This group of strange men, boldly transitioning from the Evangelical view of the child into one in a Romantic sphere, Gubar nominates as 'the Cult of the Child'. I will also add that this radical party of men, intentionally clashing with societal norms, closely resembles the Decadent 'cult' I mentioned earlier.

Thus, the innovative Golden Age creates an unexpected, but potential parallel to the defiant Decadent Movement in regards to its counter-cultural focus, origination and 'cultist' associations.

However, neither age can be drawn directly to 'morality' as my title suggests. Although Lewis Carroll of the Golden Age and Oscar Wilde of the Decadent Movement were equally concerned with moral concepts, only the Decadent Movement can 'inevitably be linked to politics' (Fleuret, 75). This period struggled with terrible working class poverty, controversy over child labor, and devaluation of Christian faith after Darwin's Evolution theory. The decay of social structure as well as the rise of industrial improvements is thought to have inspired many *fin-de-siècle* writers. Carroll's period, on the other hand, had only scratched the surface of worse times to come. So if we cannot consider the Golden Age 'a call for change' as the Decadent Movement was, how then

⁷ Thornton, R. K. R., "'Decadence' in Later Nineteenth Century England" in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Inc., 1980), 17.

⁸ Gubar, Marah, 'The Cult of the Child and the Controversy over Child Actors' in *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155. All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

are we to fairly discuss the two periods side by side in terms of “Victorian Morality” (Fleuret, 75)?

There are a multitude of definitions for the vague term ‘morality’, but here I point out that my thesis focuses solely on morality in relation egalitarian principles. Carroll and Wilde’s obsession for equality – an absolute divide between Right and Wrong – connects their subversive content and will be used to affix their two eras. In concept they preach similar ideals of “fairness”, but which their audience and social motives radically contrasted.

For instance, when Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865, class discrepancies were not as openly disputed. Although rising poverty was present in the beginning of the Golden Age, it was not the most prevalent issue. At this point, the rebuffed poor were being persuaded by religious sentiments to ease their misfortune:

‘The social unrest of the 1840s, and the growing awareness of the terrible plight of Britain’s urban poor, [...] led to the devising of a new form of evangelical fiction [...] [which] taught that the poor should tolerate their lot in this world in the secure knowledge that there were better things to come hereafter’ (Carpenter, 5-6).

As a member of the 1850s middle-class, and with little regard for the poor, Carroll’s idea of a “just world” considered nothing outside bourgeois functions. His concerns differed from Wilde’s in that he had no intention of changing entire social structures. With interests remaining fixated on the legislatures of Christ Church, his ‘enthusiasm for reform rarely extended to the world at large [...] [and] any interest he may have had in political arguments was soon diverted in other directions’ (Douglas-Fairhurst, 160-161). In this way, Carroll was able to capitalize on small forms of rights and wrongs in a pre-formatted social system. Carroll’s only intention then, his only basis for justice, was to make concrete the provincial society that was already in place. In short, to better what he already deemed satisfactory.

By 1880, ‘the social unrest’ of the forties had swelled to immense capacities, and by 1900 twenty-five per cent of Britain’s population was impoverished.⁹ Political discussions surrounding working class rights were hard to avoid and here Wilde’s fairy

⁹ Hennock, E. P., ‘The Measurement of Urban Poverty: From the Metropolis to the Nation, 1880-1920’, *The Economic History Review*, 40.2 (1987), 356.

tales flourished. Rather than writing witty “squibs” on Christ Church’s Vice Chancellor, Wilde engaged with grand-scale issues of poverty, corrupt class systems and insatiable wealth, all concerning a larger scope of people and less generic middle-class issues.

Because Carroll’s society was generally attempting to accept their social standing, as opposed to Wilde’s society that began questioning its entire moral foundation, the authors’ focuses on what is “right” naturally contrasted. Therefore we must understand that Carroll’s attention to a just society, although seemingly confined in relation to Wilde’s, is actually no different in his literary conviction.

But it is *how* these authors disseminate their ideals of justice that propels my thesis forward. Even with such different egalitarian ideals, the methods through which they subtly manipulated societal fashions were remarkably alike.

My aim is to discuss Lewis Carroll and Oscar Wilde in their attention to these cultural nuances. By comparing their fairy tales, I will prove that successful subversive literature is moved through the idiosyncrasies of culture. My three-part discussion will focus mainly on Wilde’s ‘The Selfish Giant’, ‘The Happy Prince’, and ‘The Star-Child’ from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*, and Lewis Carroll’s two *Alice* books. Through these fairy tales, Carroll and Wilde derogate Victorian inequality while concurrently concealing this derogation through three efforts:

1) The first effort, discussed in ‘Decadent Behavior of Lewis Carroll’, deals with simultaneously denying and perpetuating a coherent “meaning” in texts. Wilde and Carroll share many Decadent characteristics in writing and behavior – the forefront of them being their ability to create elusive meaning. The aesthetic Beauty Wilde depicts in his fairy tales is akin to the “nonsense” of *Alice* in that it seems so politically insignificant, the public chooses to pay no mind to its eccentricities. I also argue that both Carroll and Wilde continually suggest and deny any meaning behind their mysterious work, making it impossible to decipher if there is in fact, any substance at all.

2) The second, discussed in “‘Victorian Morality’ – A Normative Morality’, responds to Wilde and Carroll’s attention to publication through their driving forces of moral justice. Their subversive commentary regarding fairness and equality is only authorized through

furtive publication tactics. For instance, the success of both authors' first publications (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*), give them a platform for more intended criticism in the following publications of *Looking-Glass* and *Pomegranates*.

3) Lastly, shown in 'Child as Medium and Child as Symbol', "the Child" character in Carroll and Wilde's stories reflect their era's cultural mindsets. Due to Romantic infatuation with a blessed and independent child, Carroll grants Alice a new agency that allows her to mobilize through Wonderland as a fully socialized subject. In this vein, Carroll uses the "Alice" character as a *medium* through which she innocently questions of the world around her. This essentially allows Carroll to recruit her as a vessel in attempt to ask the same questions of Victorian rights and wrongs. Wilde, complying with the trend of Aesthetics, uses the child as a *symbol* of folk-Christian ethics. His child-symbol, a shadow of traditional Christian values and a representation of beautiful religious sentiments, works to highlight the immoral treatment of the working class.

So it is through self-proclaimed triviality, the manipulation of publication schemes, and employing "the Child" as medium or symbol that Carroll and Wilde remain within their cultural spheres but subtly reveal their moralistic concerns.

Evident in Carroll and Wilde's manipulation of culture, subversive literature disguises itself entirely underneath a mask of cultural trends. Arthur Symons said that 'with the change of men's thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and in its outward form' (Symons, 4). This much is true in the progression of the Golden Age and the Decadent Movement. The Decadents such as Oscar Wilde were well aware of the intrinsic connection between culture and literature and thus cunningly used this to their advantage. However it is Lewis Carroll, the humble and logical don of the 1860s, who through the Golden Age first initiates such fantastic schemes of cultural manipulation.

Decadent Behavior in Carroll

‘Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.’¹⁰

Wilde’s quote is in many ways, indicative of the entire Decadent Movement. It suggests that the only way to understand meaning in art is to engage with the façade that conceals it. One must accept *the act* as truth itself.

Wilde enjoyed this “double-identity” in art and, like many other Decadents, applied the idea to his own life. As Arthur Symons recalls ‘Wilde is not only a craftsman but also a skilled juggler who amuses people by whirling his separate “souls” before them.’¹¹ He consistently vacillates in and out of performance, begging his audience to decipher the role he currently plays. His tantalizing charade markets “Decadence” then as a twofold concept in which both art and artist have alternate intentions.

The purpose of this section is to connect Lewis Carroll with elements of Decadence in his behavior, nature, and writing. Through these links, we can traverse the planes that divide the Golden Age and Decadent Movement – finding that the “Decadent” tactic of such whimsical doubling was in fact, effectively implemented before its time. One of the most understated con artists, Lewis Carroll’s intrinsic Decadent elements almost makes him the pioneer of Decadence itself.

This comparison is certainly unconventional in the sense that we have never appreciated Carroll as a Decadent writer. It would be too bold to suggest that Carroll is some esoteric pre-Decadent figure. Hence this thesis only intends to add a new facet to his already beguiling character: his fervor for total justice and the Decadent way he empowers it through literature. Incidentally the connection has already begun to manifest itself; contemporary critics have consistently paralleled Carroll with elements of Decadence. For instance, Juliet Dusinberre in her book *Alice to the Lighthouse* goes so

¹⁰ Wilde, Oscar, ‘The Critic As Artist, Part II’ in *Intentions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 185.

¹¹ Charlesworth, Barbara, ‘Oscar Wilde’ in *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 53.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

far as to say that '[Carroll] carried the concept of art for art's sake'.¹² With such allusions to "dandy-ist" qualities, and the intrigue of Carroll's binary nature in the literary world, it is fascinating these two ideas have yet been brought together.

Naturally, our first and most obvious connection to a "Decadent" Carroll is the concept of wearing a social mask. It is characteristically Decadent to embrace an elusive double in both art and self, and similar attributes can be seen in Lewis Carroll decades before the era even arose. In his book *The Story of Alice*, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes that 'in early photographs [Carroll] looks like a cross between a military chaplain and a London dandy' (64). This statement suggests that Carroll actually embodies *two* time periods. He assumes the role of a conservative mid-Victorian, yet also somehow bears the carefree essence of a Decadent dandy.

As many know, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Carroll) was a man of duality. In an attempt to compartmentalize his academic and fantastic mind, he created an alternate personality. Behind the social mask of the rule abiding, stern mathematician and Reverend of Christ Church, he created "Lewis Carroll", a pseudonym originating from a variation of his Christian names (Carpenter, 50). In a letter to his illustrator A.B. Frost in 1878, Dodgson said 'I specifically wish my face to remain unknown to the public. I like my books to be known, of course; but personally I hope to remain in obscurity.'¹³ The pen name was intended to create a public space for his production of *Alice*, in hopes that his true identity could remain in the shadows.

The social mask that "Lewis Carroll" provided Dodgson must have been a comfort, as he had always felt more relaxed speaking through performance. When he was a boy, he entertained his younger siblings with giddy puppet plays in his miniature marionette theater. Even into adulthood, Carroll had a growing fondness for theater and continued to find people and the stage interchangeable. In his essay, "'Alice" on the Stage' he refers to his characters on stage as his 'puppets'.¹⁴ Just as Wilde 'whirls his

¹² Dusinberre, Juliet, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 73.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

¹³ Lewis Carroll, *Lewis Carroll and His Illustrators: Collaborations & Correspondence, 1865-1898*, ed. by M. N. Cohen, and E. Wakeling (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 49.

¹⁴ Carroll, Lewis, "'Alice" on the Stage', *Alice-in-Wonderland.net*, last accessed 8 August 2016 <<http://www.alice-in-wonderland.net/resources/background/alice-on-the-stage/>>.

separate “souls” before us, Dodgson lives his life behind the mask of his fantastical pen personality. He even refers to his alter ego as an entirely living, breathing person. In a letter, he writes to his child-friend Isabel Standen that ‘Mr. Lewis Carroll’, ‘is a very dear friend of mine. I have known him all my life (we are the same age) and have *never* left him.’^{15 16}

Living through his art, *behind* it rather – he creates a double within himself. Art ‘is a veil, rather than a mirror’.¹⁷ Carroll’s separate but entirely linked identity qualifies him to engage with subversive literature through a disguised figure. Carroll’s traits such as his love for art, and his duplicitous and whimsical personality allow him to mystify the public as Wilde does.

Identical to a true Decadent, Carroll’s attention to symbolism and appreciation for the beautiful was exceptional. His sister, Violet Dodgson, mentioned that ‘he was “intensely susceptible to beauty in any form”, and once broke down completely while reading her a poem’ (Douglas-Fairhurst, 64). Interestingly enough, Oscar Wilde was also known to shed tears each time he read aloud his favorite fairy tale, *The Selfish Giant*. To his sons, Vyvyan and Cyril, Wilde explained that ‘really beautiful things always made him cry’.¹⁸

Like a Decadent, Carroll was a poor, troubled young writer, who had little to offer society but his imaginative mind. Tucked away in his office at Christ Church, he typically secluded himself and found solace in life’s simplistic pleasures. He ‘went on punishingly long walks’ to relish Nature’s beauty, and he ‘socialized with a small but loyal group of friends’ (Douglas-Fairhurst, 72). His appreciation for fine art extended in visits to the picture rooms of the Royal Academy (Douglas-Fairhurst, 72). He also frequented the theater; he attended ‘several hundred plays, concerts and operas’, finding thrill in the stage’s ethereal nature.¹⁹ Carroll even uncannily mirrors Algernon’s ‘Bunbury’ attitude of

All subsequent references to the article from this source.

¹⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Letters of Lewis Carroll to his Child-Friends* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1933), 69.

¹⁶ For better comprehension, I will from this point forward refer to Charles Dodgson as Lewis Carroll.

¹⁷ Wilde, Oscar, ‘The Decay of Lying’ in *Intentions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 31.

¹⁸ Killeen, Jarlath, ‘The Selfish Giant’ in *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 61.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

¹⁹ Woolf, Jenny, ‘And Would You Be a Poet?’ in *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll: Discovering the Whimsical, Thoughtful, and Sometimes Lonely Man Who Created Alice in Wonderland* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 221.

Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as he makes repeated trips to London to escape his strict Catholic life in Oxford.

Connecting with the “degenerate” side of fin-de-siècle radicals, Carroll also despised directions and intractable social rules. He once asked Dean Liddell if he was ‘obliged to take Priest’s Orders’ and to his dismay was told that since he has become a Clerical Student, he is of course ‘bound to take Priest’s Orders as soon as possible’.²⁰ Even then, Carroll found this disagreeable so the Dean suggested taking the matter to a jurisdictional court.

In addition to personality, Decadent themes are more importantly found in Carroll’s writing. In general, Decadent art ‘involves a *falling away* from some established norm’.²¹ It establishes a decay of and regression from current social concepts. Early Golden Age writers, the instigator being Carroll, attempted to move away from the standard didactic moral children’s book and were often criticized for not following contemporary suit. By doing this, they were digressing from social normality. Consider the backward movement of “time” in Carroll’s *Looking-Glass Land*. Or the almost primal, regressive, finish when Alice continues talking to her cats in the real world. Or even the independent agency that Alice is given, atypical to Evangelic children. It might not be sufficient enough to identify Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* as a paramount example of such regression, but these elements are indeed present. The most notable qualities of Decadence in Carroll however, are evident in his behavior as an author.

A crucial reason for the rise of subversive art in the Decadent Movement was the minimal importance it was given, even by the artists who created it. It allowed art’s duplicitous nature to remain unquestioned. This is because Decadent art ‘does not boldly assert a new form against a presiding standard; [rather it] elaborates an existing tradition to the point of apparent dissolution. It is a heresy within the faith, not a rebellion against it’ (Reed, 59). Art’s content *appears* to obey Victorian society, but in fact through its own ostentation, highly satirizes its compounds.

²⁰ Carroll, Lewis, *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*, ed. by Roger Lancelyn Green (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954), 188.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

²¹ Reed, John R., ‘Decadent Syle’, *The North American Review*, 266.4 (1981), 59.

All subsequent references to the text from this source.

A brilliant example of this denigration was at the premiere of ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’, an 1892 satirical play by Wilde. On opening night, Wilde presented a group of male friends with complimentary tickets and insisted that the party wear green carnations for the show. He then arranged for one of the actors to wear a green carnation as well. The audience was as intrigued by this strange coincidence as they were by the play itself. Immediately, whisperings of the green carnation as a ‘secret symbol’ circulated through the theater.²² Characteristically, Wilde’s response to their queries allowed little clarification. When asked what the carnation meant, Wilde replied, ‘Nothing whatever, but that is just what nobody will guess’ (Sturgis, 129). He seemed ‘merely to be teasing the audience with hints of a non-existent secret. But, of course, Wilde – and most of his entourage – did have a secret’ (Sturgis, 129).

Not only were these men supposedly engaging in “indecent” activity, but the green carnation also indicated something larger. In Wilde’s essay ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’, produced two years before ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’, he identifies the foundation of his devotion to the color. He notes that the ‘curious love of green’ in individuals ‘is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament, and in nations is said to denote a laxity, if not a decadence of morals’.²³ Choosing a green carnation then for the premiere of ‘Lady Windermere’ was suggestive of a greater depletion of ethical society. While his play thrilled the Victorian audience with witty satires of infidelity, Wilde was flaunting his own propensity to engage in this same lack of contrived morality as the Victorian public.

This idea of concealing, and yet entirely exposing one’s secrets is the most important characteristic in Decadent literature and lifestyle. When Wilde states that his carnation means ‘nothing whatever’, this only contradicts the original question. These “Wildean” responses discount one’s own art, giving up one’s own authority as the artist and engaging playfully with other interpretations. In turn, the art’s “meaning” (whatever it is) becomes as innocuous as it is elusive.

²² Sturgis, Matthew, ‘Cult of Celebrity’ in *Passionate Attitudes: the English decadence of the 1890s*, ed. by Alexander Fyjis-Walker (London: Macmillan, 1995), 129.
All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

²³ Wilde, Oscar, ‘Pen, Pencil and Poison’ in *Intentions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 66.

Carroll behaves in the same way to make his works appear culturally harmless. Almost identical in nonchalance, Carroll responds to a letter about one of his poems. After being questioned ‘whether the “Hunting of the Snark” was an allegory or a political satire[:.] “for all such questions,” said Carroll, “I have but one answer, *‘I don’t know!’*”²⁴ In a separate letter regarding the same poem, he advised the reader to ‘tell your friend that I meant that the Snark was a *Boojum*. I trust that she and you will now feel quite satisfied and happy.’²⁵ He made yet another nebulous comment in the *Preface* to the 1896 edition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, in response to the many letters he received about the Mad Hatter’s “raven and writing desk” riddle. He responds, ““because it can produce a few notes, though they are *very* flat; and it is NEVAR put with the wrong end in front!” This, however, is merely an afterthought; the riddle as originally invented, had no answer at all’ (*Wonderland*, 3).

Carroll writes in circles, bemuses his own ideas, and constantly stimulates readers with ridiculous questions like, ‘Which do *you* think it was?’ (*Looking-Glass*, 272). He relinquishes all authorial command, supposing that *if* there was a deeper “meaning”, this was merely coincidental. This tendency to write in ‘misdirection’ as Douglas-Fairhurst explains it ‘might be viewed as a kind of teasing – a tone of voice that invites us to work out how seriously or playfully something is being offered, but without staying still long enough for us to pin it down’ (Douglas-Fairhurst, 45).

On the other side of this self-deprecation or devaluation, Decadent art conversely enhances itself to flamboyant degrees. It highly elaborates society such that the moral structures upholding it, fold on themselves before our eyes. We see this internal collapse in almost all Decadent literature, and is prevalent in Wilde’s fairy tales. As Naomi Wood points out, Wilde effectively ‘preaches an ostensibly orthodox Christian morality in his tales, but he also expresses a pagan joy in sensation for its own sake’.²⁶ It is similar to how Wilde ‘stresses the uselessness of beautiful things [...] [but] still holds that art has

²⁴ MacDonald, Alex, ‘Utopia Through the Looking-Glass: Lewis Carroll as Crypto-Utopian’, *Utopian Studies*, 2 (1989), 125.

All subsequent references to the text from this source.

²⁵ Gardner, Martin, ‘Introduction’ in *The Annotated Snark* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 17.

²⁶ Wood, Naomi, ‘Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales’, *Marvels & Tales*, 16.2 (2002), 157.

All subsequent references to the text from this source.

meaning'.²⁷ Essentially he creates a double standard, forcing the audience to follow his fabricated new morality.

Carroll also debases Victorian society, just to reconstruct it to his liking. His parodies on didactic children's poems have altered "morals," which become so nonsensical that they no longer function in regulated culture. For example, Carroll once wrote an innovative solution for when a train passenger has no money: 'When a passenger has no money and still wants to go by the train, he must stop at whatever station he happens to be at, and make tea for the station master' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 37). Here, the ethical question arrives: Is this considered bribery or barter? Although his solution would never function in typical society, Carroll finds a way to 'spooof regulations' so they are 'rerouted' to his preferences (Douglas-Fairhurst, 37). In effect, by completely deconstructing a formatted society, Carroll is able to criticize and, at the same time, create an entirely new moral foundation.

Wilde and Carroll break contemporary morals, only to reestablish their importance. They then permit the reader to be an integral part of this deconstruction by allowing for their own interpretations. When Carroll 'replied serenely that he was content for the meaning of [the Alice books] to be decided by the reader', he engages with outside readership. 'In 1865 such abrogation of authorial mastery in the children's book was unprecedented. Darton described it as revolutionary in 1932' (Dusinberre, 42). Through seemingly nonchalant statements, like Wilde's 'nothing whatever', their art relinquishes omniscient control, which combats the contemporary value of authorship in writing. This finally, embodies the radical attitude of Decadence.

Masks, double-identity, wordplay in literature and the resignation of omniscient authorial control – these elements that define "Decadence," also define Lewis Carroll. As figureheads and founders of the Golden Age and the Decadent Movement, Carroll and Wilde are connected by their interaction with literature. Through whimsical "play" and multiple masks, they penetrate confined systems.

It is next their writing that pursues absolute equality in Victorian people. Although their "confined systems" – Christ Church for Carroll and the whole of England

²⁷ Quintus, John Allen, 'The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 22.4 (1980), 563.

for Wilde – were vastly different, their attack on these systems was the same. Using the success of their first publications, the authors make calculated steps to grant the sequel publication with more poignant criticism.

“Victorian Morality” – A Normative Morality

The purpose of discussing “morality” in this dissertation is to establish a connecting motive between Carroll and Wilde in their manipulation of culture. That is, their attention to the public’s interests in cohesion with their writing. As previously stated in the Introduction, both authors had a fondness for egalitarian ideals. This will be stressed to an extent that discusses how their thoughts of a “just” world differ, in relation to their use of publication platforms through their fairy tales. Linking their visions for reformed society, and the publication tactics they use to operate these feelings, is pertinent to align their manipulation.

To substantiate the term “morality” – here, I will draw upon the work of contemporary philosopher Bernard Gert. Gert describes morality in two senses: ‘descriptive and normative’. Descriptive morality alludes ‘to certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or group’.²⁸ Particular methods of mode in Africa for example, would not translate to those in England. On the other hand, normative morality indicates human-based conduct ‘put forward by all rational persons’ (Gert). This would mean treating all beings with humane and merciful intentions.

Both Carroll and Wilde valued a normative morality in society, in the sense that people should be treated impartially – no one person should be considered with higher influence than another. Carroll’s pledge for equality mainstreamed through Christ Church, differing greatly from Wilde’s visions to reform England’s entire social framework. But despite this discrepancy, Carroll’s commitment to the betterment of the provincial class evenly matches Wilde’s devotion to a Socialist England. This much is imperative to understand. Carroll and Wilde had similar *senses* of equality, but focused on different scopes of people.

In Wilde’s ‘The Soul of Man’ (1891), he dreams of an “Individualist” Socialism: where man is relinquished from all sovereign command so he may pursue his artistry. It was his wish that ‘every man [] be quite free to choose his own work’ and should never surrender to the restrictions of a social system.²⁹ Structural collapse is a result of the

²⁸ Gert, Bernard, and Joshua Gert, ‘The Definition of Morality’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2016), last accessed 16 Aug. 2016 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/morality-definition/>>.

²⁹ Wilde, Oscar, ‘The Soul of Man’ in *The Soul of Man, and Prison Writings*, ed. by Isobel Murray (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 6.

social pressure a system places on its people, forcing them into industrial vocations that squander their imagination. Therefore the State should ‘give up all idea of government’ to grant its citizens the equality of a Socialist community, without a dictator to suppress them (‘Soul of Man’, 13).

One interpretation of Wilde’s Socialist world is carried out in his fairy tale, ‘The Selfish Giant’. There is an obvious suggestion toward ‘a more equitable attitude to property’ once the Giant takes down his sign that says: ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’ (Killeen, 67). Further, Wilde’s hope for a ‘society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible’, is also translated through the story (‘Soul of Man’, 1-2). When the ‘poor’ children are banished from the Giant’s garden, they are admitted to squalid conditions such as the ‘dusty’ road ‘full of hard stones’ (‘Selfish Giant’, 14). Here Wilde makes clear the disparity between the rich and the poor, as the Giant secludes his beautiful garden from the rest of the needy people. Finally when the Giant shares his garden with the impoverished children, he levels himself in status by playing on the ground with them, and together they create an ideal egalitarian society.

The fairy tale’s “moral” concludes that men cannot be equal until they obstruct the hierarchical system that continues to make them superior to or lesser than other men. A just world for Wilde then eliminates the authority of government – the source of poverty and the culprit of bridled personal expression.

Carroll too, in smaller measures, shares the same normative sentiment against a dominating authority. On January 19th in 1864, Carroll journaled about six student scholarships to be given out the next month. His concerns regarded the terms of the scholarships, as Dean Liddell made them available only to ‘the candidate who shows the greatest proficiency in Mathematics’.³⁰ Carroll writes here that the Dean’s decision ‘inevitably [ignores] (as he seems to do) the right of the Electors to choose the one whom they think the most fit in all respects’ (*Diaries*, 209).

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

³⁰ Carroll, Lewis, *The Diaries of Lewis Carroll*, ed. by Roger Lancelyn Green, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1954), 209.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

The subtle comment ‘as he seems to do’, makes it clear that Carroll finds Christ Church to be utterly authoritarian, dominated by the opinions of Dean Liddell. He feels decisions should be considered through popular vote, with all students given equal merit. Livid, Carroll writes a letter to Liddell protesting the scholarships’ selectivity. He receives a letter back stating that his complaints are ‘hypercritical and unnecessary’ to which Carroll replies with more fervency for the cause (*Diaries*, 209). After receiving a second rejection from the Dean, he renounces his position as potential assessor, closing with a statement that he ‘should be very happy to [reinstate] when the notice has been altered to meet [his] views’ (*Diaries*, 209).

It is clear Carroll is ‘committed to the reform of Christ Church’s creaky structures’ (Douglas-Fairhurst, 160). However, his intensity for democratic systems rarely extended beyond his internal world at Christ Church. In terms of large governmental politics or the treatment of others outside his social class, Lewis Carroll shared little investment. Finding politics exhausting, and his schoolwork ravaged with ‘dull, uniformity’, he seldom invested in matters he did not find agreeable – a leisurely walk or a long chat with child-friends would do (*Diaries*, 223).

Here, we come to the terminal difference between Wilde and Carroll’s ideas of normative, humane morality. Unlike Wilde, Carroll had no intention of ameliorating the wrongs of Victorian society or the ill treatment of the poor. In fact he had haughty views of the lower classes, as seen in his article, ‘The Stage and the Spirit of Reverence’. Carroll writes

‘a word means what the speaker intends by it, and what the hearer understands by it, and that is all. [...] This thought may serve to lessen the horror of some of the language used by the lower classes, which, it is a comfort to remember, is often a mere collection of unmeaning *sounds*, so far as speaker and hearer are concerned.’³¹

This statement uncovers Carroll as chiefly conservative. His exposure to what we can assume is cockney speech, is very little and makes for a clichéd view of the language. Needless to say, his concerns for the rights of the “general public,” focused mainly on middle-class, bourgeois issues.

³¹ Gardner, Martin, and Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: 150th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 251.

In due time, his writing mirrors his concerns. Carroll's passion for the micro-politics of Christ Church were eventually funneled into punchy creative writings called "squibs." One of his squibs named 'The Majesty of Justice' (1863), Carroll describes as 'a gentle satire on the Vice-Chancellor's Court, with reference to the Jowett controversy' (*Diaries*, 193). He terms it 'gentle', however Carroll's hopes for a purely democratic environment are clearly at work.

"The Majesty of Justice," which concludes: "That makes the silliest man/Seem wise; the meanest men look big:/The Majesty of Justice, then,/Is seated in the WIG". The "WIG" punningly implies that this court is unjust because the judge is a Whig (that is, Liberal), just like Dean Liddell of Christ Church.³²

The connection between fictional writing and spiteful emotion in Carroll's life begins his exploration of subversive literature. His squibs act as journals that allow Carroll a private stream of consciousness, and depict his angst over Christ Church government.

Interestingly enough, at the greatest peak of his squib writings, Carroll was also preparing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) for publication. Almost all of his squibs were written during or around the time of his very first *Alice* book: 'The Majesty of Justice' (1863), 'Examination Statue' (1864), 'The New Method of Evaluation, as Applied to π ' (1865), 'The Dynamics of a Parti-cle' (1865), 'Facts, Figures, and Fancies' (1866-1868), etc.

Thus, we can actually view the first *Alice* book as a silent documentation of his otherwise unpublicized feelings. It is not accidental that Alice recognizes 'the judge' in the tart trial of Wonderland, "because of his great wig" – a reference strikingly close to the 'WIG' in 'The Majesty of Justice' (*Wonderland*, 125). We should also note that 'The Majesty of Justice' was written 'at the same time Carroll was adding the courtroom chapters to his manuscript for *Wonderland*'.³³ And 'the trial scene was expanded from two pages to two chapters', illustrating Carroll's growing political concerns (Douglas-Fairhurst, 144).

But like these suppressed concerns, his squibs were also kept unpublished. It was not until 1874 in a collection called 'Notes by an Oxford Ciel', that any of these writings

³³Day, David, 'Who Stole the Tarts?' in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Decoded: The Full Text of Lewis Carroll's Novel with its Many Hidden Meanings Revealed* by David Day, ed. by Tim Rostron (Canada: Doubleday Canada, 2015), 228.

saw print. Comparatively so, it is not until 1872, just a year after the publication of *Through the Looking-Glass*, that we see Carroll approach electoral issues outside Christ Church.

Carroll takes his first active step in the governmental community by becoming a member of the Christ Church Governing Board in 1867 – two years after *Wonderland* was published. He then began to delve into concepts of electoral politics. With normative moral conviction, he was concerned with ‘selecting the most preferred candidates to hold office, conducting elections properly, promoting minority representation, and achieving fair representation’.³⁴

By 1872, he was insistent on finding ‘the best method of voting [...] determined by reason and fairness’ (Abeles, 3). Finally by 1885, he had ‘involved himself in the most important political issues of his day’, including those regarding the voting rituals of the House of Commons (Abeles, 3). Eventually, his conclusions were considered some of the greatest advancements in legislative theory – ‘the most interesting contribution to Political Science that has ever been made’ as political theorist, Duncan Black claims (Abeles, 1).

Carroll’s transformation from silent thinker to bold activist is one evident in his growing participation from Christ Church governance to grand political theorist. However as stated earlier, this change can be traced through his writing – especially through the two *Alice* books. *Wonderland* acts as a personal journal whereas *Looking-Glass*, written during the peak of Carroll’s pursuits outside Christ Church, attempts to rectify all of *Wonderland*’s wrongs. Comparing the societal structures of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass Land*, we can understand Carroll’s own relationship with justice and his gradual inclination toward a more subverted literature.

To best describe the political structures of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass Land*, they must be evaluated by their fundamental game bases. As Duncan Black points out, ‘one of the *Alice* books is based on a game of cards, the other on a game of chess’.³⁵ This

³⁴ Abeles, Francine F., *The political pamphlets and letters of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and related pieces: a mathematical approach* (New York, NY: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 8.

³⁵ Black, Duncan, ‘The Central Argument in Lewis Carroll’s “The Principles of Parliamentary Representation”’, *Papers on Non-Market Decision Making*, 3.1 (1967), 4.

concept naturally divides Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land into one world of corrupt authority and one of controlled fairness.

In a game of cards, little is presented to a player upfront. Though all are subject to the same rules, a player can cheat, lie, and potentially deny any responsibility he has to his fellow competitors. Certain card games, such as “Blackjack” and “Poker”, actually encourage these conceivably unethical moves, as they are essential to victory. This is evident when Alice first meets the Spade gardeners in Wonderland. They are “cheating” by attempting to paint red the accidental white rose tree. They are then “caught” by the Queen after she flips them over, like a game of “Cheat” – at first not knowing ‘whether they were gardeners, or soldiers, or courtiers, or three of her own children’ as ‘their backs [are] the same as the rest of the pack’ (*Wonderland*, 93).

Given the moral flexibility of card games, and the general lack of exposure, individual card players then have a certain sense of personal agency *within* rules of the game. This is much like the Queen of Hearts’ fabrication of arbitrary croquet rules. By sentencing all competing players and card-arches to execution, she essentially wins the game by foiling anything that stands in her way.

Another example of this self-appropriation in *Wonderland* is the Caucus Race that Alice is involuntarily subjected to. The scattered and unorthodox race begins with ‘a sort of circle’ the ‘exact shape [of which] doesn’t matter’, and the party runs about in every direction until the Dodo calls the group to a stop (*Wonderland*, 35). After he is asked who wins the race, ‘the Dodo [can] not answer without a great deal of thought, and it [stands] for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead’ (*Wonderland*, 35). His hesitation, as well as the ‘silence’ of his audience, suggests that he is not only authorized to imagine a rule at times of confusion, but also that *the game* complies with his rules (*Wonderland*, 35).

In respects to a governmental system, Alice’s placement in the race also resembles the inevitable inequality that is Wonderland – and therefore, Christ Church. A customary “race” or a “game” will have a winner, but this particular race allows for ‘*everybody* [to] win, and *all* must have prizes’ (*Wonderland*, 35). ‘All’ however, strangely does not include Alice as the Dodo decides she is the one to hand out prizes. Although Alice is granted a thimble from her own pocket, it seems gravely unjust that she

is to give prizes at all, considering she was a participant in the race. This situation seems representative of the selective scholarships discussed earlier, chosen from ‘all’ proficient candidates (of Mathematics).

Thus, Carroll’s *Wonderland* becomes a portrait of suppression to unrivaled authority. Carroll himself even mentions that he wrote the Queen of Hearts as ‘an embodiment of ungovernable passion – a blind and aimless Fury’ (“Alice” on the Stage’). Alice’s utter inability to object Wonderland tyrants resemble Carroll’s personal qualms with Dean Liddell of Christ Church.

After unleashing such criticism in the first book, Carroll’s transformation into an activist of electoral justice is wholly evident in his *Alice* sequel. Many examples of authority abuse presented in *Wonderland*, Carroll then corrects in *Looking-Glass*. *Wonderland* largely embellishes the misuse of authority whereas *Looking-Glass Land* describes a very utilitarian world, relying on equal and fated fairness.

Using a chessboard infrastructure for *Looking-Glass Land*, this rivals all prospects of a singular dominant authority. Distinct from card games, all pieces in chess, as well as all moves and countermoves, are visibly laid out in front of players. There are equal spaces; and unlike the nature of shuffling cards, all potential of getting a “good hand” is nullified with the mirrored set of chess pieces. These rules, also distinct from card games, are explicit and forever established.

Therefore, *Looking-Glass Land* must carry the same weight. Their citizens abide by ‘the authoritative rules of chess, rules that they have not participated in making, and have no hope of changing’.³⁶ Contrasting from the citizens of *Wonderland*, *Looking-Glass* participants do not have the luxury of personal agency. They cater to regimented formation in response to an overall authority that is fair to all subjects.

Another example of Carroll’s corrections is how he rectifies disputes between citizens. *Wonderland* fights are erratic, motivated by vanity, and meaningless in their pursuit for resolution. There comes a dispute between the executioner, the King of Hearts, and the Queen of Hearts about how to correctly execute the Cheshire Cat. In an outburst of emotion, they all argue at once (even after Alice is called to settle the

³⁶ Liston, Mary, ‘The Rule of Law Through the Looking Glass’, *Law and Literature*, 21.1 (2009), 47. All subsequent references to the text from this source.

dispute), solely to prove dominance over the others. Carroll provides these trivial fights to illustrate the futility of dominance in general. A couple paragraphs before this, Alice also finds that her ‘hedgehog was engaged in a fight with another hedgehog’ (*Wonderland*, 98). Likening citizen quarrels with the quarrels of animals, Carroll demonstrates them as primal with an overall inability to be organized or even “won.”

On the other hand, Looking-Glass Land arguments are calm, effective, and require an overall etiquette to them. When Tweedledee and Tweedledum bicker over who should have the rattle, they only proceed after one asks the other if ‘you agree to have a battle?’ – to which the other politely replies, ‘I suppose so’ (*Looking-Glass*, 199). They do not talk wildly over each other; they also do not ask Alice to pacify the argument as she is asked to do over the question of Cheshire’s execution. The two boys then dress for battle, discuss the length of the battle, and finally explain to Alice the execution of the battle. Here, Carroll completely revolutionizes the nature of fighting from primitive chaos to devoted communication.

The Red and White Knight also engage in a dispute that is resolved similarly. Like the Tweedle brothers, their battle only begins once each has sworn to obey the ‘rules of Battle’ (*Looking-Glass*, 238). Apparent by the Tweedles and the Knights, *Looking-Glass* citizens have discussions before resorting to violence. This is entirely different from *Wonderland* characters like the Spade gardeners who yell petty comments until one screams, ‘Well, of all the unjust things-’, and begins a physical fight (*Wonderland*, 91).

Thus, the *Wonderland* world of ‘unjust’ card citizens, clearly opposes the “fair” chessboard subjects of Looking-Glass Land. But as Carroll’s readers move from the ‘anarchic tendencies’ of *Wonderland* to the Looking-Glass Land of ‘determinism’, they are in essence moving through Carroll’s increasing affinity for just political systems (Liston, 47). The *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* books then as a pair, are an astute example of Carroll’s transformation of political voice.

Regarding the two books as a set, we are able to inspect the level of criticism that rises by the second *Alice*. At some point between Carroll’s life as a silent Reverend in 1865 and his publication of *Looking-Glass* in 1871, *Alice* grew stronger as a call for political change. Yet since its publication, ‘*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* has never

been out of print and has been translated into nearly 200 languages.³⁷ How the *Alice* books became a global phenomenon while concurrently degrading political foundations, all lies with Carroll's incredible publication tactics.

The changes made from the manuscript that Carroll gifted Alice Liddell (*Alice's Adventures Under Ground*) prepare for a worldwide audience and outlines Carroll's ultimate intentions for a mature readership. The most fascinating aspect of this transition from personalized Christmas gift to fantasy children's book is Carroll's decision to collaborate with an illustrator. He has impeccable attention to detail, apparent in the hand-drawn artwork of the original book, and in everyday life. Isa Bowman, a close friend of Carroll's, mentioned that 'he was very particular about his tea', 'and in order that it should draw properly he would walk about the room swinging the teapot from side to side for exactly ten minutes' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 317).

Therefore it is fitting to assume he would take as much, or even more caution with a published work. When Carroll approached John Tenniel, an illustrator from England's most infamous political magazine, *Punch*, his attention to the illustrations was domineering. "Don't give Alice so much crinoline," he would write, or "The White Knight must not have whiskers, he must not be made to look old."³⁸ Interaction between writer and illustrator was tense and often begrudgingly slow due to Tenniel's leisurely attitude and Carroll's sharp criticism. The biggest question then is, why Carroll decided to incorporate another artist at all – considering his meticulous and borderline neurotic attitude toward *Alice*.

The answer lies solely in Tenniel's political background. An 'established illustrator' with 'a professional understanding of the visual codes and illustrative techniques of his day', Tenniel had already seen much success in the networking world.³⁹ This drew an entirely new readership as Tenniel 'already had [] an adult rather than a child audience' (Lovell-Smith, 383). Partnering with such a renowned illustrator allowed

³⁷ Cicurel, Deborah, '25 things you never knew about Alice In Wonderland', *Metro*, last accessed 16 Aug. 2016 <<http://metro.co.uk/2015/07/04/25-things-you-never-knew-about-alice-in-wonderland-5267597/>>.

³⁸ Morris, Frankie, 'The Draftsman and the Don', in *Artist of Wonderland: The Life, Political Cartoons, and Illustrations of Tenniel* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 141.

³⁹ Lovell-Smith, Rose, 'The Animals of Wonderland: Tenniel as Carroll's Reader', *Criticism*, 45.4 (2003), 383.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

Carroll to cater to the child market and also deliberately invite readers of political sarcasm.

However, another important concept is the preparedness for more mature readers from first book to following sequel. This is something Oscar Wilde does well as he mentions that his second book of fairy tales (*A House of Pomegranates*), ““had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as [he] had of pleasing the British public”” (Wood, 168-169). Considering the nature of fairy tales, typically read aloud to children by adults, Wilde must have known his stories would contact an adult readership. It was because of this that Wilde ‘did not write [*A House of Pomegranates*] with a child audience in mind’; his writing gravely proves this (Wood, 168-169).

Wilde explains that ‘The Happy Prince’ works as ‘an attempt to treat a tragic modern problem in a form that aims at delicacy and imaginative treatment’ (Killeen, 22). The ‘delicacy’ he implements in ‘The Happy Prince’ is clearly contrasted by abrupt reality in ‘The Young King’ in the second book. Readers of the first tale only experience the depths of destitution through stories that the prince tells the swallow – ““Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow [...] In a bed in the corner of the room [a] little boy is lying ill. He has a fever, and is asking for oranges”” (‘Happy Prince’, 3). However in ‘The Young King’, readers are forcefully exposed to the cruelties of destitution as the Young King experiences them for himself. In one of his dreams for instance, he is placed in a loom factory with ‘meagre daylight’, where the ‘gaunt figures’ of ‘pale, sickly-looking children’ crouch over their looms (‘Young King’, 64). He describes the ‘horrible odour’ and a ‘foul and heavy’ air that accompanies walls ‘[dripping] and [steaming] with damp’ (‘Young King’, 64).

The Alice books as well encountered a mature evolution from *Wonderland* to *Looking-Glass*. Though *Wonderland* deals with a bloodthirsty Queen and a Duchess who beats her child, *Looking-Glass* citizens fall victim to much worse. The ‘Jabberwocky’ from the *Looking-Glass* poem that Alice reads, with ‘jaws that bite [and] claws that catch’, is imaginative enough to frighten a child (*Looking-Glass*, 164). But accompanied with Tenniel’s gruesome picture of the dragon-like beast, the Jabberwocky becomes a ravaging and torturous monster, sure enough to bring a child to terror. The growing

violence and aggression treated in the second volumes of fairy tales is keen to an adult audience and therefore expands readership on a maturity scale.

Another technique Carroll uses is the publicity of his fictional child. Although hesitant to completely publicize his child-muse, the 'Alice' character eventually became a global promotional figure. This must have been difficult for the methodical author to release all paternal authority over 'Alice.' However, he 'was fully aware of her commercial value', and allowed for alternate publications to take place, like "'Alice" on the Stage' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 313). Alice's' reputation grew at such rapid pace that 'by the mid-1880s [she] had become as recognizable as the figures in traditional nursery rhymes' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 308).

After creating such a cultural flurry, the audacious little girl from Wonderland became a marketing device that would ultimately capture the attention of both children and adults. By working with Tenniel and mounting the first book's success, Carroll's published *Alice* dealt with more mature concepts, it gained a political audience, and it consequently embraced commercialization. These silent devices that incorporated wider readership, are indebted to the nature of the fairy tale. Thus, our final publication technique is the genre through which the others function. The seemingly innocuous genre, which an 1860 London Review critic said 'required no literary gifts', naturally posed no social threats (Dusinberre, 44). Their political significance are as inconsequential to the general public as Wilde and Carroll *appear* to be about their works.

All these schemes when evaluated as integral parts of a publicity system, determine how Carroll and Wilde subvert inequitable conditions in a muted and socially acceptable manner. With a now broad exposure of their works due to the publication tactics, the authors needed to include elements that would appeal to general interest. That linking element will be represented in "The Child" character of Carroll and Wilde, and will give us a final understanding of artful manipulation of culture. Thus, we come to the last section of the paper.

Child as Medium and Child as Symbol

The final segment to our understanding of culture manipulation explores social trends contemporary with an author's time. If we refer back to Arthur Symons, he suggests that 'with the change of men's thought comes a change of literature, alike in its inmost essence and in its outward form' (Symons, 4). Put another way, through content and genre, literature reflects the nature of its particular time period.

This section aims to show how fictional children of two time periods are represented differently based on cultural tastes and environment. Through the portrayal of children in Carroll and Wilde's fairy tales, we experience the 'inmost essence' of both the Golden Age and the Decadent Movement. Mainly, this alludes to Carroll's use of the seven-year-old Alice as a *medium* through which his readers should understand the story – and therefore, understand his criticism. On the other hand, Wilde's fairy tale children in 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Star-Child' are depicted as Christ-like *symbols*, to represent the lost folk-Christian ethics of Victorian society.

In addition to themes like "nature", "imagination", and "the past", an additional cultural change of Romanticism – which instigates the Golden Age – concerns the agency of children. While 'the theological view' of children found them to be 'inherently wicked', Romantic children were considered 'beacons of hope' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 106). Their inherent "goodness" 'allowed adults to feel that their own souls could be washed clean' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 110). Thus, the Romantic child was understood as a race entirely separate from Adults, revered for an imagination and innocence comparable to divine purity.

Consider Wordsworth's poem 'Lucy Gray' (1799), which includes all Romantic elements discussed thus far. 'Lucy' is a prime example of the Romantic child: 'sweet', 'solitary', and embedded in nature.⁴⁰ Obeying her father's orders, she unknowingly wanders into a fatal storm. The poem focuses on her lack of experience in the world, but also chastises the ignorance of her 'wretched parents' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 230). Responsibility in the poem falls onto the adults, illustrating the child as much too carefree

⁴⁰ Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Lucy Gray' in *The Lyrical Ballads: 1798-1805*, ed. by George Sampson (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1961), 229. All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

and naïve to function on their own. No longer considered ‘an adult in the making’, the mysterious Romantic child instigated an explosion of children’s literature, that later developed into the Golden Age in the 1840s (Gubar, 155).

Golden Age authors complied with, but subtly denied this new perception of the helpless child. They embraced youth, but wrote fiction through the unconventional voice of a child narrator. This perspective intrigued the child-fascinated public, but also deconstructed these new Romantic impressions. *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley (1863), for instance, centers on protagonist Tom, an orphaned chimney-sweep child. He endures hunger, physical labor, and torture inflicted on him by his master, Mr. Grimes. This firsthand perspective of a parentless child, fighting every hardship on his own, challenges the old notion that deems children unfit to interact with the world. Although Golden Age authors were ‘often faulted for *failing* to endorse the new ideology of innocence’, this radical development in the child perspective provided a new outlet for subversive criticism (Gubar, 7).

Similarly, the Aesthetic Movement offered Decadent artists an opportunity to capitalize on its principles as well. Both Aestheticism and Decadence pivot on the ‘Art for art’s sake’ maxim, but Decadent art infiltrated its symbolism with ‘an obsession with decay’.⁴¹ This was heavily due to the changing framework of England, ‘between religion and science’, ‘between Romanticism and Realism’ (Mox, 128). Decadent literature portrayed this imbalance through symbolic fiction that slowly dissolved within itself, like the unstable constructs of Victorian society. Dorian Gray, for instance, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, embodies every Decadent conviction that promotes artless beauty, yet he ironically falls to his death due to these concepts.

“The Child” character, narrated in Carroll and symbolized in Wilde, is a clear example of these decaying cultural concepts. Carroll’s child protagonist, Alice, boldly roams into an unknown world as inexperienced as ‘Lucy’ wandering into the storm. But it is through her narration that Carroll explores the true depth of a child’s naivety.

Like Romantic and Golden Age authors, Carroll values childhood as a fleeting period of purity, unmarred by social pressures. Therefore, Alice’s transition from

⁴¹ Mox, Kyle, ‘Decadence, Melancholia, and the Making of Modernism in the Salome Fairy Tales of Strindberg, Wilde, and Ibsen’ in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Marja Harmanmaa and Christopher Nissen (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 128.

innocent, pliable girl in *Wonderland* to the fierce independent in *Looking-Glass* is one considered in multiple respects. On the one hand, her evolution into a commanding political voice at the ending trial of *Wonderland* resembles that of Carroll's own growing political affinity, discussed in the earlier section. On the other, her transition vacillates in and out of Romantic space, questioning the new Romantic perception of children.

A couple months after Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, he described Alice Liddell as having 'changed a good deal, and hardly for the better – probably going through the usual awkward stage of transition' (*Diaries*, 231). Because 'Carroll recognizes childhood as *the* period during which socialization takes place', this is precisely why he chooses the transitioning Alice as his protagonist (Gubar, 119).

As readers experience the fantastic lands through Alice's eyes, they appreciate her perspective in two ways: as an innocent child and a growing adolescent. Readers are inherently conflicted with these visions because although it is impossible to forget that she is still a learning middle-class child, she also acts responsibly, morally, and on principle in the chaotic world of Wonderland "adults". She assumes care of the Duchess's baby for fear of its safety. She scolds herself to tears when she commits a social infraction. She searches for the Rabbit's glove despite his mistaking her for Mary Ann, his housemaid.

However, her adult impression is shattered when Wonderland and Looking-Glass Land adults continually refer to her as a 'child': 'She is only a child', 'show your ticket, child!', 'this is a child!', and 'you're a human child!' (*W* 93, *LG* 178, 232, 186). This is to remind us that Alice is still in the fragile state of socialization. She is impressionable, available to new interpretations, and as such is expected to retain some quality of naivety. It is because of this '(ostensible) innocence of childhood' that allows 'adult authors [like Carroll] to pretend that language can be innocent, too' (Gubar, 30). So when Alice logically asks the Hatter, 'But what happens when you come to the beginning again?', the Hatter simply changes the subject as a parent would when their youngest asks an inappropriate question. Although she is excused for these questions *because* she is a child, through her narration we see the destruction of an entire system is as easy as asking one question. It is how Carroll likens Wonderland's instability to the outside world.

A transitioning girl like Alice then, able to express maturity and innocence, all while receiving exemption for her actions based on these terms, is an almost imperceptible character for a reader. She is undeniable and nonnegotiable: a perfect vessel for Carroll to challenge “the Child’s” perceived innocence, as well as highlight injustice.

Because of Alice’s susceptible age, it is almost expected that she undergo an adolescent transformation from Wonderland to Looking-Glass Land. In the closing scenes of *Wonderland*, the King accuses Alice of violating a rule of court: ‘Rule Forty-Two: *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court*’ (*Wonderland*, 137). At first Alice objects, for they have not measured her height. When she is asked to comply, she denies the rule altogether and accuses the King of ‘invent[ing] it just now’ (*Wonderland*, 137). This differs from her earlier interaction with the Dodo and the Caucus-race. The Dodo must take time to think about who has won (no doubt ‘invent[ing]’ the rule just the same), and he too victimizes Alice by telling her to hand out prizes from her own pockets. To this, Alice adheres willingly, and it is curious also that she does not disagree when the prize she receives was already in her possession.

Judging by the chaos Alice causes at the end of the *Wonderland* trial, it is foreseeable that she should question her surroundings much faster in the sequel. Just two chapters through *Looking-Glass* and, not as ‘surprised at her courage’ this time (*Wonderland*, 93), Alice objects the Queen’s authority: ‘a hill *can’t* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense’ (*Looking-Glass*, 173). She has also reached a newfound sense of authority in Looking-Glass Land, as she immediately pledges to become a Queen. Alice never assumed she might become a Queen in Wonderland, judging by her timid claim to be a Duchess: ‘When *I’m* a Duchess,” she said to herself (not in a very hopeful tone, though)’ (*Wonderland*, 103). It is apparent that like the transformation from anarchy to determinism in the fantasylands, Alice herself has made a transformation from inexperienced Romantic child to experienced youth of the unknown.

Further, although Alice is ‘not part of [Wonderland’s] general class’, in Looking-Glass Land she has taken place of Lily, daughter to the White King and Queen (Liston, 52). Here, she has actually become an integral component to Looking-Glass Land, no longer considered as “other”. In fact, her own evolution into a Queen epitomizes

Carroll's view of children as maturely equal. This is evident when, 'as an experiment', Alice orders the pudding back defying the Red Queen's previous orders to take it away (*Looking-Glass*, 263). Alice, a pawn in the game, and finally a Queen herself by the end, challenges the Romantic thought that children are separate from their adult superiors.

If we consider Carroll's passion for egalitarian treatment, another reason to use seven-year-old Alice as a medium, considers the intrinsic moral obsession of children. They have a one-sided view of the world, considering only their wants and opinions. Because of this, there is 'nobody [] more outraged by perceived cheating than a child' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 37). Therefore, they 'quickly discover' when they are being deceived, like when a parent 'fail[s] to tell a favourite story in *exactly* the same way *every time*' (Douglas-Fairhurst, 37). And unlike adults, they never hesitate to point out these faults in others.

Alice acts very much like a child in this respect, as she only becomes a moral activist when prejudice befalls her. For example, Alice does not interfere with the Queen of Hearts when she tells the Duchess to either be gone or be executed 'in about half no time' (*Wonderland*, 160). The Queen considers this 'a fair warning' despite the obvious physics in question that inhibits anyone to get somewhere in 'no time' (*Wonderland*, 160). However, when Alice herself is treated unjustly in court, she has no issues voicing objections. When the Queen tells her she faces a "sentence first [and] verdict afterwards", Alice vehemently retorts with, "Stuff and nonsense! [...] The idea of having the sentence first!" The Queen tells her to remain quiet and again, Alice objects, "I wo'n't!" (*Wonderland*, 140)

Her egoist passion for fair treatment, is child-like, and yet, completely justifiable. The citizens victimize Alice, but it is because Carroll has projected this injustice through our narrator's perspective that we are enticed to take empathy with her. We are not moved by the Duchess's mistreatment. We are, however, lifted when Alice has been treated unjustly. Readers are then questioned why it is acceptable for one person to be mistreated in lieu of another. Additionally, in terms of Carroll's interpretation of the Romantic child, Alice's determination for self-justice proves herself to be a child who is able to work with adults, critique their faults, and challenge their morals. Unorthodox as this is, through protagonist narration Alice gains reader support against the 'wretched'

adults that should conventionally overrule her. Through the vessel that is ‘Alice’, visible in her transformation from *Wonderland* to *Looking-Glass*, Carroll is able to redesign just worlds, as well as undermine the entire ideal of the Romantic child.

On the other hand, the Child character in Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales does not work as a protagonist *medium* like Alice. They are not curious, questioning, or politically demanding to highlight unjust foundations. Instead, they are abstract *symbols* of a lost Christian ideal, hoping to condemn readers for this loss. Seen in ‘The Happy Prince’ and ‘The Star-Child’, children have beautiful moral intentions, symbolized so because of their intrinsic relation to Christ – and the culture’s infatuation with the aesthetic.

At the turn of the century, Christian faith was struggling to maintain validity, ‘somewhat less in the ascendant than it had been a few decades earlier’.⁴² Progressive articles published in the 1890s like ‘Evolution and Christianity’, rivaled others that sought to keep biblical principles alive. In the conservative article, ‘Has Christianity Failed?’ by Father Ignatius (1891), he implored that ‘Christianity is the religion of democracy’.⁴³ Yet in the same breath, he also notes that ‘universal equality of the poor man’ privies on his unwavering faith that such destitution is his only path to Heaven (209). And though he admits that Christianity has come dangerously close to ‘aristocratic worship’, he continues to say that it also functions on ‘socialistic’ influences (209-210). These controversial principles transitioned religious worship into a Decadent, symbolic kind that focused on ‘feeling more, while believing less’ (Knight, 24).

Thus in the Decadent Movement, with an increased interest in symbolism came ‘a distinctively Christian approach to aestheticism’ (Knight, 32). Wilde accepted this cultural motion to some extent but, like Carroll and the Romantic child, simply modified this idea to his liking. Wilde envisions Christ as a ‘remodeled [] form of artistic truth’, as an ideal rather than a cold fact (Knight, 33). It is a near-Agnostic view of Christianity, like the “Individualist” Socialism that Wilde dreams up in ‘The Soul of Man’. But viewing these grand-scale social foundations as simply “a state of mind”, allows Wilde to receive it as innocently as a child.

⁴² Knight, Frances, ‘Dimensions of the Fin de Siècle’ in *Victorian Christianity at the fin de siècle: the culture of English religion in a decadent age* (New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 14.

All subsequent references to the text from this edition.

⁴³ Father Ignatius, and Ouida, ‘Has Christianity Failed?’, *The North American Review*, 152.411 (1891), 209.

Full of hope, innocence and imagination, children are then the perfect symbol for folk-Christian principles. Directly aligned with Wilde's hope for an egalitarian society, the infant in 'The Star-Child' signifies good fortune. In a fit of despair, one woodcutter complains, 'Injustice has parceled out the world, nor is there equal division of aught save of sorrow'" ('Star-Child', 115). At this moment, the 'Star-Child' falls from the sky in what seems to be a fateful appraisal to the woodcutter's grief. This foreshadowing symbolizes the child as an emblem of hope for a better future, and ultimately constructs their presence as such in this closing story of *A House of Pomegranates*.

Their innocence too, is symbolic of the decay of current social frameworks. Wilde utilized children 'as [icons] of humanity uncorrupted by social convention', characters that would provide an objective perception of Victorian mores.⁴⁴ The little ducks in 'The Devoted Friend' for example, portray imbalances in society when they wonder why their mother orders them to stand on their heads. The fact that they "will never be in the best society" lest they appeal to this social standard, is erroneous to their innocent minds ('Devoted Friend', 18).

Wilde introduces children in this way, as socially uneducated, but with an imagination that is pure and holy. In 'The Happy Prince', the Charity Children tell the Mathematical Master that they have seen angels in their dreams. He frowns not only because 'he [does] not approve of children dreaming', but also because he has never seen an angel himself ('Happy Prince', 1). It is children who are blessed with an exceptional connectivity to God. They have an inherent connection to the Heavens, one that adults have since let go of.

In effect, children are often recognized in Wilde's tales as celestial beings, or blessed forces that have graced the Earth. The small little boy in 'The Selfish Giant', symbolic of Christ, has 'the prints of two nails' on his hands, 'and the prints of two nails [] on [his] little feet' ('Selfish Giant', 19). The baby found by the two woodcutters in 'The Star-Child' is first mistaken as a 'treasure that had fallen from the sky' (115). It is made even more emphatic when readers find that the 'Star-Child' was in reality, a human

⁴⁴ Sumpter, Caroline, 'Innocents and epicures: Decadence, Symbolism and the child' in *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 140.

infant. Yet, the most intriguing aspect of the symbolic angel-child is Wilde's depiction of children as Disciples of Christ, teaching the corrupt world.

Consider Wilde's fairy tale, 'The Selfish Giant'. At one point, the children creep through a mysterious hole in the Giant's fence. They alight all the trees and bring blossoms and leaves, with the exception of one little boy who is crying and shivering in the corner. He is too small to reach the branches so his corner remains snowy. As soon as the Giant discovers that his selfishness has caused a fatal winter to reign over the city's children, he takes empathy with them. 'It is the adults (represented by the giant) who learn from the children', evident by the smallest boy in the group of children.⁴⁵

The "child" as "teacher" was a newfound concept that here contemporary psychologist, E. A. Kirkpatrick notes: 'From olden times, it has been thought that adults should be the teachers, and children simply learners; but in this nineteenth century of civilization, the greatest find that they can learn from the little ones.'⁴⁶ An increasing appreciation for the child-teacher is something Wilde no doubt understood as he integrated them in his tales, and continued to parallel them with Christ.

Lastly, the Child signifies a call to moral action. When the woodcutter takes in the fallen child, his friend 'marvel[s] much at his foolishness and softness of heart' ('Star-Child', 115). Ironically, it was he who earlier spoke of injustice and it is he who would have left an infant in the woods to perish. The Child here immediately activates questions of morality and "just" responsibility.

Ultimately, Wilde's children are symbols of superior morality, pure of heart and pure of God. But like Alice the medium, they too are innocent and proficient, naïve and wise, and utterly undeniable characters. With such simplistic minds of justice, "the Child" figure is impossible to deny. It's the child's objective mind as well as the authors' portrayal of them as the adult's mental equivalent that make Carroll and Wilde's use of Medium and Symbol possible.

⁴⁵ Grenby, M. O., 'Fantasy and Fairytale in Children's Literature', *The British Library*, last accessed 15 Aug. 2016 <<http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/fantasy-and-fairytale-in-childrens-literature>>.

⁴⁶ Kirkpatrick, E. A., 'Children as Teachers', *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 16.408 (1890), 305.

This is how Carroll and Wilde penetrate their child-centric and aesthetic-focused cultures. Depending on civil taste then, “the Child” in the Golden Age is drastically different from “the Child” presented in the Decadent Movement. Not only does this represent the final and most literary parallel to Carroll and Wilde, it also reveals a natural tendency for culture and literature to intertwine.

Conclusion

To manipulate culture as Carroll and Wilde have done, one requires the subtle touch of a masked con artist. As Decadent critic Jules Lemaitre claims, the Decadent ‘has the senses of a sick man, but the soul of a child, he has a naïve charm in his unhealthy languor’.⁴⁷ He has two flitting sides, both subversive and conservative – like the question of “meaning” in Carroll and Wilde’s fiction. He must comply with and deny social rules, embracing the paradox that makes his subversive literature so discreet – namely, adult criticism embedded in a children’s fairy tale.

Through careful study of this subversion, the ‘Golden Age’ and the ‘Decadent Movement’ are now linked in what might be considered a nigh impossible connection between Carroll and Wilde. In this exploration of Lewis Carroll and his Decadent elements, we drew a parallel between cultural movements and the production of subversive literature. It uncovers Carroll’s attention to egalitarian ideals and his similarities, in literature and writing, to the figurehead of Decadence, Oscar Wilde. More importantly, it illustrates how Lewis Carroll effectively implements Decadent schemes in pursuit of subversive fiction, twenty-five years prior to the Decadent Movement taking effect.

Ultimately, we have uncovered a link between the 1860s and the 1890s by virtue of cultural manipulation. This finally begs the question whether culture and literature can be appreciated as one unit. It seems entirely so as two vastly different writers of two entirely contrastive eras find subversive techniques in the same manner. This, beginning with the humble and seemingly ostensible writings of the don of Christ Church. No longer appreciated solely as the father of children’s fantasy literature, Lewis Carroll has now established an additional place among the cunning and radical writers of the Decadent Movement.

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⁴⁷ Wells, B. W., ‘Contemporary French Poets: II. Decadents and Symbolists’, *The Sewanee Review*, 4.1 (1895), 37.

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