

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
IN SEARCH OF THE WHITE QUEEN:
A STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF AUDREY THOMAS

by
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Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to clarify the function of the Alice model in Audrey Thomas's fiction. In a series of four novels she refers the reader repeatedly to the works of Lewis Carroll.

Audrey Thomas's heroines all exemplify Alice's reactions to the madness and chaos that reign in Wonderland and the Looking Glass world. For instance, Mrs. Blood (Mrs. Blood) dresses her children like Alice and the White Rabbit or remembers Alice's dilemma about the Christmas presents she should send to her feet. The Isobel of Blown Figures travels like Alice through the Looking Glass (Africa becomes a gigantic chess game). Alice, as well as Isobel Cleary (Songs My Mother Taught Me) and the more adult Mrs. Blood and Rachel (Latakia), all undertake a search in order to better comprehend their relation to the mad worlds they inhabit. In particular, they try to decipher the language spoken by their fellow-characters; in this sense, their search is also for the literal meaning of words, through the linguistic labyrinths that imprison them. However, if the narrative of the Alice books indicates a re-ordering of Alice's universe, Thomas's narratives point in the opposite direction, to a refusal "to go home".

There will be three chapters in this thesis. Chapter One will examine the correspondences that exist between Thomas and Carroll's fictions at the level of the story. Chapter two

will focus on the two authors' common method of dealing with the language of their fiction. Chapter three will emphasize the divergence between Thomas and Carroll at the level of myth and genre. In this last chapter, I shall analyse both the Alice books and Blown Figures from a (fairy-tale) genre perspective in order to situate exactly the function of Carrollian elements in Thomas' writing. This study will enable the reader to develop some wider hypotheses as to the nature of a feminine mode of writing in contemporary literature.

To Danny and Anushka

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Introduction

The origin of the word "search" goes back to the Old French cerchier which means "to go around, to surround," to the Latin circ-are: "to go round" which itself comes from circus: "circle."¹ Thus, the etymology of this word is rooted in a most basic archetypal image, that of the circle, which evokes "une rondeur pleine," to borrow Bachelard's words, that of the womb.² The French mythocritic Gilbert Durand notes after Bachelard the narrow relation between the circular refuge and the womb. Whereas the square ("le refuge carre") is that of the fortress, the citadel, Durand points out that "l'espace circulaire est plutôt celui du jardin, du fruit, de l'oeuf ou du ventre, et déplace l'accent symbolique sur les voluptés secrètes de l'intimité."³ Hence, my statement that search is female in essence. In addition, "circus means "cirque" and by metonymy, it designates the "spectator" of the "circus." "Search" is also observation, female curiosity.

"Quest" comes from the past participle quaesitus, a of the Latin verb quaerere: "to seek." For the original form and etymology we are drawn further back into another Latin verb quaeso,ere with an even older Sanscrit origin cish-: "to hunt out."⁴ Interestingly enough, a reading of the OED under the term "quest" further reveals that "quest" refers essentially to an external type of action. It indicates that the quest is oriented towards the outside. Its semantic space is male. In everyday classical Latin, quaeso means "to look for" ("chercher à se procurer"). It points to a male need. In Medieval Romance, the word serves to define the type of expedition or adventure undertaken

by a knight to procure something or achieve some exploit.⁵ 2
History loads the term with male powers.

Even though common usage confounds "search" and "quest", mostly in the use of such synonymic phrases as "in search of" or "in quest of", these two words appear to have different ranges in meaning. The OED does emphasize the possible internalisation of the term "search," but not of "quest." Among other definitions, the OED states that "to search" means "to look through, examine internally (...A receptacle of any kind) in quest of some object concealed or lost."⁶ As I shall show, this definition describes accurately the situation of Thomas' characters in her fiction. Similarly, our reading of the French Robert Dictionary serves to confirm the difference between "chercher" and "quêter." The former can refer to a mental activity, within the circle of one's mind, while the latter strictly involves some externa(-ised) action.⁷

Because of its association with the circle, the search implies a circular searching process. It is repetitive, and cyclical, it is an imprisonment within and an eventual acceptance of its own reality, i.e. its round femaleness.

These philological preliminaries which have some foundations in the "Imaginary" serve to explain my title, situate my work. Thomas is a female contemporary novelist writing about female characters searching for a female model who happens to be Lewis Carroll's heroine, Alice, and who at the end of her adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking Glass becomes a White Queen. This thesis shall follow the meanderings of Thomas' heroines and Carroll's Alice until their successful crowning as the White Queen and it will further unveil the dimensions of the White Queen as a Great Mother prot-

-otype in the light of a mythocritical approach.

In his two tales Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass,⁸ Lewis Carroll is preoccupied with the notions of madness and chaos. The former can be defined as a form of "unruliness," a non-conformity to the accepted or established rules, an incoherence of behaviour and language. The latter may result from madness or it may provoke and/or emphasize madness. These two notions interrelate in Carroll's prose with the motif of the journey undertaken by Alice. The little girl's travel presents the reader with most uncommon, surprising events, characters or sayings. She not only observes her new environment, she participates in its life and organisation. If she first launches into her journey as a Victorian child, at the end of The Looking Glass she is turned into a queen. Her trip is not only a fun-trip for the sake of pleasing herself or the reader; it has a purpose, which however hidden, must be discovered.

Inasmuch as Alice's trip describes a projection into an outer space, its discovery per se and ~~inasmuch~~ as she reaches her goal by becoming a queen, wherefrom she returns safe to her world, the word "quest" is appropriate. Yet, in the sense that Alice sometimes wanders utterly helpless and is bounced from misfortune into misfortune, her "quest" loses its directing force, becomes circular, caught as it is between the walls of Wonderland and the Looking Glass. Also, as the third chapter of the present study will try to demonstrate, her wish to be the White Queen

betrays her longing for acting out a prominent female role. Hence, her quest becomes internalized, rounded, female. It becomes a search.

In Thomas' four novels Songs My Mother Taught Me,⁹ Mrs. Blood,¹⁰ Blown Figures,¹¹ Latakia¹² which shall be treated here in this respective order, the notions of madness and chaos are equally central. They are woven into the story of the heroines who launch into different journeys in the manner of Alice. Even though they duplicate Alice's reactions in the face of the new environment they visit, their trip possesses a more internalized meaning; it is a psychological search that plunges the heroines into the darkest recesses of their mind, and further, into myth. If Alice's search bears some signs of the quest, that of Thomas' characters is exclusively circular and female. Furthermore, if Alice acts out only for a short time the role of the queen, the "Isobels" of Thomas adopt it till the end of time. The narratives of Audrey Thomas' fiction lead her heroines to their triumphant coronation as "White Goddesses," to borrow Robert Graves' terms. Myth is at the core of Thomas' work; it is dimly sketched out in Lewis Carroll's writing.

Thomas' female characters have the habit of talking like some of the creatures of Carroll's Wonderland. For instance, the heroine of Songs, Isobel, sings:

All Things Bright and
 Beu-uu-tee-full
 All Creatures
 Great
 A-and
 Small (p. 35),

which is an imitation of the Mock Turtle's tune:

Beau-ootiful Soo-oop!
 Beau-ootiful Soo-oop!
 Soop-oop of the e-e-evening,
 Beautiful, beautiful soup! (p. 141).

Or Mrs. Blood is obsessed by Alice's fantastic adventures to the point that she dresses her children "as Alice and the White Rabbit for [a] fancy dress parade" (p. 180). In addition, the Isobel of Blown Figures becomes another Alice as she gets on a train trip which may take her back to departure point "as luggage" (p. 219). Thomas' iterated use of Carroll's technique of language or her adaptation of Carrollian scenes and characters to her fiction indicate her deep affinity for the writing and craft of the Victorian writer. The fact that Audrey Thomas chooses Carroll as the informing model for her fiction raises some fundamental questions. Namely, what exists in Carroll's work that fascinates Thomas and renders her own literary enterprise successful? To what exact extent does Thomas follow her model? Or, what, in Thomas' fiction necessitates at the level of structure the use or adaptation of Carroll's writing?

There will be three chapters to this thesis. Chapter one will consider the correspondences that exist between the searches undertaken by Thomas' female characters and their prototype, Alice. Thomas' deliberate intention to create and sustain an analogy between her heroines and Alice will be analyzed throughout her fiction. Also, I shall pay more specific attention to Carroll's and Thomas' parallel development of "role

reversals." In the case of Carroll, the reversal of roles enables Alice to act out her frustrations as a disciplined child. By overthrowing the Queen and taking over power, Alice assumes the role usually played by adults in her world. This eventually enables her to return to her Victorian environment and accept its limitations. Thomas' characters can also alleviate the pressures exerted on them by heavy male powers. Not only do they get rid of their fears, they also proclaim their freedom against men.

In Chapter Two, I wish to deal in particular with the language aspect of both Thomas and Carroll's tales. Following Carroll, Thomas resorts to puns, homophonic ambiguity, neologisms, portmanteau words, etymology, euphemisms, lexical and structural ambiguity, in order to convey the idea that language has deteriorated and fails to express proper communication between human beings. The madness and chaos the reader has discovered in the worlds visited by the different heroines are now emphasized at the linguistic level. The very language spoken by the characters lacks order, meaning, conformity to grammatical rules. Thus, madness is not a differential behaviour, it is also a language that functions in its entirety in our world. Acts as well as speeches or words are out of focus, dis-mantled. Lewis Carroll shows in a humorous fashion the potential dangers of a world such as Wonderland where no one attempts real communication with his fellow man. Audrey Thomas indicates the actual consequences for her characters of inhabiting an entropic universe. The various heroes are on a search for meaning, the literal or figurative meaning of words. Both Carroll and Thomas inscribe their reflections on the nature and degradation of language in

the body of their prose: they meta-write.

In the Third Chapter, I shall approach the works in question by considering the major points of divergence between Carroll and Thomas. On the one hand, while Carroll gives prominence to the present, that of the journey, with its promises of future **excite-**ment, Thomas emphasizes the hovering, nightmarish presence of the past over the life of her heroines. On the other hand, role reversals will be approached, no longer from a socio-historical perspective, but from a mythocritical viewpoint, in order to demonstrate that Blown Figures, Thomas' most experimental novel, can be seen as a mythic narrative, something foreign to Carroll's tales. Finally, I shall give consideration to both the Alice books and Blown Figures from a genre perspective. I shall determine whether the Alice books qualify for the title of "fairy-tale," as Carroll wished to call them and if Blown Figures constitutes a modern type of fairy-tale for adults or grown-up Alices.

This last chapter will bring back into focus the notion of search. Alice has gone in search of the White Queen but has done so only in the limits allowed by the fairy-tale genre. Thomas' Isobel has assimilated the White/Red Queen's functions and characteristics and become the prototype of the Great Mother. Isobel's or Rachel's completed search draw a well defined circle with attached lunar or ouroboric powers.¹³ Finally we shall discover that Thomas and Carroll are counter-reflections of each other through the Looking Glass.

Chapter One:
A View of the Search

The epilogue of Songs recalls Alice's conversation about madness with the Cheshire Cat in Alice's Adventures:

"But I don't want to go among mad people,"
Alice remarked.
"Oh, you can't help that,"
said the Cat,
"We are all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
"How do you know I'm mad?"
said Alice.
"You must be," said the Cat,
"or you wouldn't have come here" (p. 89).

The passage is also used to introduce Mrs. Blood's story in Mrs. Blood (epigraph), establishing a connection between Mrs. Blood and Alice's Adventures on the one hand, Mrs. Blood and Songs on the other. Blown Figures, Thomas's third novel, is dedicated to both Isobel and Alice, "all the Alices whatever your mothers called you" (epigraph) and captures the adventures of the same character, a few years later, as she undertakes her second trip to Africa. Some of the events in Blown Figures duplicate those in Mrs. Blood which in turn echo those of Songs or of the Alice books.¹ It can then be affirmed that Thomas deliberately constructs an analogy between Carroll's female character, Alice, and her own as she depicts their progression in life from childhood (Songs) to maturity (Mrs. Blood, Blown Figures). Although

Latakia chooses to focus on the more reflective, self-possessed female character Rachel, the novel also contains allusions to some of the characters or events of Alice's Adventures such as the following Cheshire Cat passage: "And this time it was you I saw as the Cheshire Cat, me talking to you across a table at some distant date, and you, just a disembodied head floating a few inches above your soup plate" (p. 20).

Thomas' obsession with Carrollian figures or scenes pervades the whole of her fiction (particularly Blown Figures)² to the extent that it raises some fundamental questions in the reader's mind. Why does Thomas, a twentieth-century female writer, choose Carroll, a nineteenth-century male writer, as the particular model for her fiction? In the following pages, I shall attempt to answer this question and show the network of correspondences that exists between the writing of Carroll and Thomas.

What characterizes the universe that Alice enters after her fall down the rabbit hole--which can be seen as marking a brutal, unexpected change in her situation--is uncommonness. The animal-like creatures Alice encounters address her abruptly, prevent her from justifying herself, or contradict her Victorian logic. Because she belongs to an external world based on rules totally different from those of Wonderland, Alice fails to confront adequately the new world that spreads before her. The series of misfortunes she encounters tells the reader of her externality and foreignness to the land of wonder, her confusion in the face of such disorder.³ In fact, chaos is what rules Wonderland: no one obeys any of the rules prescribed but his own, which is to say that rules everlastingly shift from

one moment or person or place to the next. The croquet game is one of the best illustrations within Alice's Adventures of Alice's failure to comply with the rules that define Wonderland's organization. Alice complains to the Cheshire Cat that the players "all quarrel so dreadfully . . . and they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them . . . and you've no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive . . ." (p. 113). The traditional definition attached to games (fair competition, chronological arrangement with a beginning and an end, victory of the winner) is totally inapplicable to Wonderland where "players all [play] at once, without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while" (p. 112). Even the trial that takes place at the end fails to abide by proper legal rules: the King goes by a "most important piece of evidence" which in fact does not have "an atom of meaning in it" (p. 159) or the Queen requests the "sentence first-- verdict afterwards" (p. 161). From Alice's perspective, the reader can assert that the creatures of Wonderland are marked individually or collectively by madness. This madness is illustrated by the fact that they all act either in the absence of rules (including those of proper language communication) or by constantly undoing them.

However, the Cheshire Cat's comment that Alice too is mad enables the reader to view Wonderland, not as an exclusive, alienated world with its own bizarre happenings, but as a metaphor for our world. The land of wonder is the world we inhabit and Carroll's focus on the daily language problems that arise among Wonderland's creatures (due to their poor interpreta-

tion or conveyance of messages) is a reminder to the reader of our own unsuccessful manner of establishing proper relations with our fellow man. Later, in The Looking Glass, Carroll uses the chess game image as another metaphor for life itself.⁴ The chaotic rules that define the game indicate that life is ordered by chaos. Collective or individual madness, chaos, the absence or destruction of rules, alienation (due to improper communication) are Carroll's focal points in the Alice books.⁵

They are also prominent in Thomas' writing, a contemporary female writer preoccupied with women's experiences of childbirth, fear and death⁶ which are turned into a nightmarish madland because of our lack of adequate words to describe their condition. Our society "euphemizes" women's situation so that they find themselves alienated within a world that has ceased to cohere. Both Thomas and Carroll seem to address a female listener. Whether young (Isobel Cleary, Alice) or old (Mrs. Blood, the heroine of Blown Figures, Rachel in Latakia), Thomas' female protagonists share with Carroll's Alice the same sense of inferiority (here due to youth, there due to a male-oriented view of society), the same desire to break loose from their imprisonment in silence and to confront themselves with a (reversed) mirror-image of the world they inhabit, so as to overthrow the powerful mechanisms that preside over their alienation. Thomas finds in Little Alice the perfect model for her own creation, "Isobel,"⁷ in the very sense that Alice shows "Isobel" the path that leads to "role reversals," the mirror-reflection way by which she usurps adult (parental) authority in order to insert herself better into a society in loss of balance, equality or meaning. The journey

Alice undertakes through madness, chaos, foreignness aims at enabling her to gain more understanding of life's arbitrariness (more precisely in her case, adult's arbitrariness at imposing strict rules on children).

To use Carroll's main metaphor, the mirror, Thomas makes of Alice a mirror reflection of "Isobel." As Alice travels through Wonderland or the Looking Glass world our image of her fuses and interchanges with that of "Isobel."⁸

The correspondences between Thomas and Carroll's texts will now be examined. This will enable the reader to retrace the journeys of "Alice/Isobel." Thomas' four novels will be dealt with in an order that is not faithful to their date of publication, but that follows closely the development of the characters from innocence to experience. Songs portrays the childhood and adolescence of Isobel Cleary. Mrs. Blood is the story of the same character, years later as she goes through the process of losing a child. We follow her again on her second trip to Africa in Blown Figures. As for Latakia, it echoes some of the events and concerns of the previous fiction.

In Songs, Isobel is portrayed as a child for whom the summer trips to her grandfather's cottage represent an escape from the boredom of family and city life or her parents' petty quarrels. Very much like Alice, Isobel finds life unexciting and her only joy consists in waiting for the approaching summer. She admits that "the journey to town, like the journey to the woods itself, was almost a religious experience, with us as children and novitiates, recognizing and genuflecting before the

necessary stations of our ecstasy" (p. 21). Similarly, Alice is fascinated by the presence of a white rabbit "with either a waistpocket or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she [runs] across the field after it In another moment, down [goes] Alice after it" (p. 26). Both little girls launch into their exciting journeys with the joy of running away from their everyday lives: "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do" (p. 25) while Isobel sometimes talked with her sister "of leaving home, of going to live with Harry" (p. 33).

Thus, Isobel's entrance into "Journey's End" metaphorically reads as her passage down the rabbit hole into the land of wonder which opens before Alice. The cottage in the mountains or Wonderland itself become the mythical locus where time is, according to the young Isobel Cleary, reduced to an "immortal and circular day" (p. 18). To use Eliade's concepts of sacred time and space,⁹ everything converges to designate "Journey's End" as the axis mundi the centre where magic partakes of everyday reality, making nature inexhaustible to the point that "blueberry bushes, are still full, as if by magic, in spite of all our picking" (p.20).

Both children's curiosity is challenged to the extent that it reduces the negative impact that some events may have on them. Alice's encounter with unfamiliar or inhospitable characters, her series of misadventures are made easier for her to cope with by the very fact that she travels through an exciting place. Even when she is confronted with an unhappy event, she declares: "I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit hole--and yet--and yet--it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! . . .