

The Out-of-the-Way Novels of Petronius and Lewis Carroll

Near the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll writes: "Alice said nothing: she had sat down with her face in her hands, wondering if anything would *ever* happen in a natural way again" (124). In this one sweet and simple line, Carroll expresses the frustration that his young protagonist experiences over the course of both of her adventures, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Written 1,500 years earlier, the protagonist of Petronius' *Satyricon*, Encolpius, might very well have had the same poignant reaction as Alice amidst his own twisting, often disconcerting misadventures. The unusual and even startling configuration of both time and place, the labyrinthine worlds in which they are situated, the manner in which the protagonists interact with the world around them, and a myriad of mirrored motifs amount to striking parallelism between Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and Petronius' *Satyricon*. These unusual works on their own tend to elude traditional analysis; however, this paper uses the lens of Bakhtinian dialogical literary theory in order to gain profound insight into the strange nature of these works through the observation and comparison of the exceptional traits that they share. Moreover, in addition to Bakhtin's theory, the deliberate comparison of these two works ultimately explores a unique and innovative shared thread exploring the unusual generic quality of these novels while underscoring the elements that make them as charming as they are enigmatic.

The three strongest factors demonstrating the generic innovation in both Petronius and Carroll's works are their unusual treatment of time, space, and dialogue. Both authors' novels fit into what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the "adventure novel of everyday life," a genre characterized by its lack of cyclic and temporal order, inability to trace a lineage passage of time, the

“reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their interchangeability in space”(135), and, finally, by the fact that there is no discernable change in the biographical aspects of the protagonist. Both novels, however, do demonstrate vague indications of the cultural time period in which they are written, distinguishing them from “adventure-time.” The strange manner in which these protagonists move through time is further complicated by the chaotic manner in which they move through space: Encolpius and Alice find themselves attempting to navigate, again and again, through various impossible labyrinths. Encolpius famously struggles to escape the labyrinth of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, and, furthermore, finds himself perpetually thrown in impossible-to-navigate landscapes; Alice, meanwhile, deals not only with the same problems, but with the unique challenge of addressing new physical forms of self *within* these labyrinthine worlds. Finally, in both authors, the problem of communication leads Encolpius and Alice into more perplexing, often dangerous situations. Petronius’ vulgate Latin provides the reader with a familiarity that makes misunderstandings between Encolpius and his peers all the more vivid and stressful; Alice, meanwhile, runs into constant misunderstandings with her companions, and the reader is often at a loss along with her.

It is rare that a novel – a highly flexible genre already – can push the boundaries of accepted form and yield a result that is not only enjoyable to read, but also remains enticing and intellectually stimulating. Perhaps the greatest testament to their success, however, is their timelessness. These unique works contain strong parallel motifs that aid in our understanding of their analysis. Through a dialogical comparison examining their shared narratological curiosities, Carroll and Petronius’ works become easier to understand in conversation with one another. It is a gift to have novels of this sort to aid in the study of each other, all while being an immense

pleasure to revisit again; to resume a dialogue with the same characters; to plunge back into the labyrinth, through the looking-glass, into Wonderland.

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