**Through the Looking Glass**

**By Lewis Carroll**

**THEME**

[**Through the Looking Glass**](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass) is Carroll's sequel to [**Alice in Wonderland**](https://www.gradesaver.com/alice-in-wonderland). A few of the characters who appeared in *Wonderland* reappear in *Through the Looking Glass*, including [Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice)'s cat and the Hatter and the Hare. More significantly, however, is the way in which the sequel mirrors the first book: it begins inside on a snowy November 4, while *Wonderland* began outside on a sunny May 4; it employs the imagery of chess where *Wonderland* employs the imagery of playing cards; time and space vary dizzyingly in *Through the Looking-Glass* while size changes drastically in *Wonderland*. This is all even more significant when considering the main motif of the book, the looking-glass, or mirrors.

Even though both books are considered works of children's literature, and both reflect on the theme of growing-up, *Through the Looking Glass* approaches this theme in a more abrupt and less playful way. It is as if the troubles associated with approaching maturity are introduced in *Alice in Wonderland* and then met with resignation in *Through the Looking Glass*.

**SUMMARY**

[Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice) is sitting in a chair scolding her kitten, Kitty, when she notices the alternate world inside the Looking Glass. She determines to explore this other world, and as soon as she steps inside, she finds a place much like yet much different from her home. She encounters a smiling clock, animate chess pieces and a book with backwards text, but determined to see all of this amazing new place before she has to return, she abandons the living room and steps outside.

After a confusing romp through the garden, talking flowers direct Alice to the [Red Queen](https://www.gradesaver.com/red-queen), who informs Alice that she is a part of a giant chess game. Alice's goal is to become a queen herself, and the Red Queen instructs her that she must begin in this second square and inevitably reach the eighth square in order for this aspiration to be realized. She explains also a bit of the backwards nature of life in the Looking-Glass world.

Alice jumps over the first brook, which brings her to her first adventure. She finds herself in a carriage full of animals, and once she passes over the next brook, she realizes she is alone with an enlarged gnat from the carriage. She encounters Tweedledee and Tweedledum next, who dance, recite poetry and bicker. She is thrust into a shop which turns into a boat and then back into a shop. In that shop is an egg, which transforms into [Humpty Dumpty](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#humpty-dumpty).

Soldiers arrive at Humpty Dumpty's wall, and with them, she notices the White King, with whom she travels to town to see the Lion and the Unicorn battle. After sharing some cake with onlookers, she finds herself alone in the forest, until she is joined by two knights who fight to determine who will take her prisoner. The victor, the Red Knight, leads her to the brook that is the final barrier to her queenship.

Jumping over the final brook into the eighth square, Alice is joined by the Red and White Queens, who frustrate her with their impossible quizzing. She joins a feast that is being celebrated in her honor, but soon things begin to go awry, and suddenly, the Red Queen is actually her kitten, and she is back in her living room. Alice is left wondering who had been dreaming during her adventures in the Looking-Glass world.

## CHARACTER LISTS

## Alice

Alice is the protagonist of the story. She is a playful, imaginative seven-year-old who was also the main character of Carroll's first book. She is inspired by an actual girl who was in some ways Carroll's ward. She leads the reader through the looking-glass world, which is a metaphor for her journey to adulthood. She is both insightful and ignorant; she often does not understand the characters in the looking-glass world, but often it seems that her thoughts and conversation make more logical sense than theirs. She is persistent in making it through to the eighth square, and she consistently shows her precocious personality through the shameless curiousity and fearless decision-making she engages in while wandering through the looking-glass world.

Alice spends the entire book participating in a game of chess, in which she is a white pawn trying to make it to the eighth square so that she can become a queen. As much as the book emphasizes the necessity of completing that journey, so, too, does it push Alice forward with regret. This tone illustrates the strong paternal feelings the author had for Alice in real life as well as his imagination.

## Tweedledum and Tweedledee

Tweedledee and Tweedledum are twin brothers who encounter Alice again in the looking-glass world. They were also present in Wonderland, in Carroll's first book. They are important because they embody proper social behavior and norms. Even when they engage in fighting, they first decide they are going to do it and then set a time limit so that they can sit down for dinner at the appropriate hour. They impart a message of caution, both through their strict adherence to rules and also through the story of the Walrus and the Carpenter, which they relate to Alice.

There is also a mean streak in these two brothers, for the tease Alice about the idea that she is merely a figment of the Red King's imagination. They claim that she is not real, and that she is only a character in the Red King's dream. Alice is disturbed by this idea, even though she questions at the end of the book whose dream was responsible for the looking-glass world.

## Humpty Dumpty

This is also a character who appears not only in this book, but in the author's prequel as well. He is also the subject of a popular nursery rhyme. He is an egg (though he vehemently denies it) with a face and human clothes. Alice is not fond of him, which is not surprising; he constantly interrupts her to instruct her on vocabulary and language. Carroll uses this character to express his view on the ways in which people misabuse language. Humpty Dumpty is nauseatingly confident about his definitions of words, even though most of what he has to say is ridiculous.

He does introduce Alice and the reader to the concept of the portmantaeu word, which is a word that combines two words and their meanings into a new word. He does this in order to explain Jabberwocky in his own terms before his inevitably fall.

## White Knight

The White Knight is the protagonist in the last leg of Alice's journey. He saves her from the Red Knight, who wishes to capture "the white pawn." Instead of capturing her, he treats her as an equal and allows her to roam free, although he does express his feelings about her particular journey. He is a disorganized, clumsy character who is interested in bogus inventions. He does, however, have a kind heart.

# THEMES

## Reflection/Reversal

The most apparent example of this theme is the looking-glass itself, which provides a reflection of the actual world for [Alice](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#alice) to explore. Within the looking-glass, everything is backwards. Text is reversed: Alice reads the poem Jabberwocky backwards. Space/direction is inverted: Alice must walk away from where she wants to go in the garden in order to actually get there. Ideas are also inverted, which is plain in many of the conversations that Alice has with the characters encountered in the looking-glass world. Tweedledee and Tweedledum are mirror images of each other. The [White Knight](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass/study-guide/character-list#white-knight) talks about putting a right foot into a left shoe. In the railway carriage, Alice is traveling in the wrong direction.

## Satire

Carroll does not mean this tale to be serious. For one thing, an imaginative child who talks to cats is the protagonist, and it is she who leads the reader through the book. Additionally, there is no sense of consistency in the book; as soon as a rule for the looking-glass world is introduced, it is either abandoned or changed. Further, Carroll appears to be poking fun at adult intellectualism. All the characters who attempt logical debate either argue themselves into confusion or lose to a seven-year-old Alice.

## Dreaming

Carroll sets his entire book in the context of a dream. Whose dream it is remains unclear, but Alice definitely acknowledges that she was having adventures in someone's dream, if not her own. What is so important about this is the fact that the absence of reality does not matter to the protagonist, and it clearly does not matter to the author. In fact, Carroll seems to believe that dreaming is the ideal, especially for young children, as suggested by the poem at the very end of the book. He goes as far as to suggest that there might not be any set reality at all, and that life is just the stuff of dreams.

This nonchalance about the issue of what is real and what is not is partly what makes Alice such a compelling protagonist. The precocious Alice takes everything in stride. In a way, her vast imagination allows Carroll to expose the reader to a multitude of fantasies. And because Alice never ultimately passes judgment to the point of denying these whimsies, the author is able to bring his reader into an intricate world entirely of his own invention.

## Alienation

Alice is in fact alone through much of the story, though not as much literally as figuratively. She is the only one of her kind in the Looking-Glass world, so even though she is surrounded by creatures pretty much at all times, she has trouble relating to their foreign ways. She is also isolated from the rest of her family due to her imagination; there is a reference to the frustration she causes when she plays pretend. At many points in the story, the reader has the sense that Alice has no place to go to feel at home; she expresses her loneliness while in the Looking-Glass world, but she immediately rebounds and worries about ultimately having to end the game and return to her house.

## Adulthood

Carroll's attitudes toward adulthood are not entirely clear in the book, though the book itself can be seen as a motif for the progression from childhood to adulthood, as represented by Alice's journey as a pawn to queenhood. She undergoes many experiences that can be seen as crucial for development, such as the discovery of identity that is demanded by the situation in the wood of forgetfulness. Many of the poems recited focus on the theme of passing youth. However, the incompetence and immaturity of those that may be considered adult characters in the book calls the idea of a progression into question. Alice often proves to be smarter, more thoughtful and more resourceful than the "adults" she encounters in the looking glass.

## Moral Choice and Social Ettiquette

There are many cases in [***Through the Looking Glass***](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-looking-glass)in which the question of control and intentionality come into play. Looming over the entire novel is the question of whether Alice's adventures were really just a figment of the Red King's dream. Additionally, it is unclear whether Alice has any choice about moving from the second to the eighth square, and there are a number of instances during which she seems to question her goal.

Carroll, as a Victorian era author, is concerned about the methodical, logical examination of behavior. Within almost every conversation Alice has with the characters in the Looking-Glass world is at least one critique of their social norms. But these are not serious critiques, for it has been established by the author that everyone in this world lives backwards, and as Alice has observed, many aspects of living backwards seem impossible. Inevitably, though, this often nonsensical evaluation of rules might indeed be a comment on the burdensome obligations of adulthood and the moral/social responsibilities that accompany it.