

GENDER READING [*This is ONE of TWO readings required*]

Student 1: Low Excellence

NZQA Intended for teacher use only

The way Tim Burton has portrayed Alice in his rendition offers modern audiences a 19th century character made relevant for the 21st century. In a gendered reading of *Alice In Wonderland* (2010), the director, Tim Burton turns gender stereotypes upside down. Women are strong minded, save the day, vanquish monsters/slay dragons, they're usually fighting against each other and there are no strong men. This contrasts to conventional fairytales in which the main goal for the female protagonist is to find 'Prince Charming' and live happily ever after. Happiness is associated with getting married, not so much in accomplishing and striving for their dreams. In her real world, England, Alice lives in a patriarchal society – where her identity is defined by her relationship with men, a situation some may argue, audiences would still recognise today despite the 100 year gap. However, when she falls down the rabbit hole we see a direct reversal of this.

Alice's England is a patriarchal society where the power, both in government and society, is with men. In Underland women have power and are in all places of leadership, a noticeable difference between the real world and the fantasy world of Underland. Alice is shown as a powerful lead protagonist, an evolving character who is not one dimensional. She is the one to slay the Jabberwocky, not Prince Charming. All other females in the film are also powerful, including the little field mouse that has some serious attitude. The Red Queen rules by strong fear throughout the Kingdom. The people and creatures around her are scared to cross her in case she yells her infamous line "Off with their head!" She rules with a large army and fierce creatures such as the Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky — a creature which draws parallels to fairytale fiends such as the dragon in *Sleeping Beauty*.

The White Queen, being the antithesis of the Red Queen, is the role of the character that is all goodness and light" the praised one in a fairytale. She rules fairly and benevolently. However, she at times embodies a sickly sweet character, with over exaggerated, abnormally light steps and ballet style movements making her a little disturbing. She also refuses to harm any living creature because it "breaks (her) vows", however she is perfectly fine with others going to kill in her place, such as Alice. This shows that extremes in both character types are not particularly desirable. Although, most Kings and Queens throughout history do exactly this, rule from the throne and do not get their hands dirty. It could be said that newly empowered Alice embodies the best of both characters, the decisiveness of the Red Queen and the compassionate nature of the White Queen. Being feminine is not widely associated with the ability to also be assertive and a successful figure of authority. Burton debunks this popular idea and shows that women can be feminine and still be a good leader even though some critics argue that its only when the characters act masculine, then they gain respect.

The role of power reversed in *Wonderland* is also seen in the lack of strong men portrayed, one could say they are seen as weak. The primary male characters are The Mad Hatter and the Knave of Hearts. The Knave of hearts is under the fear of the Red Queen like the rest of the kingdom, however he has the confident facade that he is seemingly intelligent and in fact the one manipulating the Queen. This confidence and manipulation would normally build him up as a character with a big role to play in the conflict but Burton glances over him in the climax and final battle scene. Apart from him being a great support to Alice, The Mad Hatter seems weak. As an individual he cannot stand on his own, it is only when he is in partnership

with Alice his importance as a character grows. The Mad Hatter is essentially only seen as Alice's sidekick. He lacks any key motive and development but this could be due to Burton's aim being to focus on the Mad Hatter's emotional side, rather than his madness. Both characters are ultimately defined by their relationship to the female characters in the film, a contrast to the 'real world' where females like Alice are defined by who they marry.

5 In Burton's other films, it is common to see more dominant female characters than male. He doesn't say whether this is on purpose or just a coincidence that his male characters are not dominant and strong. His other films embody this idea in films such as Edward Scissorhands (1996) and Mars Attacks (1996) screening male characters that are not particularly strong. When Tim Burton was asked of his opinion of his version of Alice In Wonderland being seen as a film with feminist ideologies he seemed to not be too fussed with what others thought about it and said "*Beyond all the kooky bells and whistles of my Alice, it's a simple internal story about somebody finding their own strength. She's been battered around by real life, has never quite fitted in ...*"

Before she enters Underland Alice's inability to fit in is determined by the perceived role she has as a woman. Her worth and her choices are determined by others' view of what a women should be. When Alice returns from Underland, she has to reconsider her identity on her terms. In the 'real' world she was wife potential, In Underland she was saviour potential.

2 In the 19th century society of the time, women were expected to marry for security and society, marrying within their social hierarchy. In Alice's case, she is expected to marry Hamish. He is portrayed as a weak, pompous character that clearly is embarrassed by Alice's childlike and spontaneous personality. He tells her to suppress her jovial and childlike curiosity. Alice shows she is not afraid of bugs, something pampered girls raised in Victorian society would not like. But Alice is a no nonsense protagonist who can see beyond superficial distractions. 2 The return from Underland sees her reject others notions of what she should be like.

2 When Alice returns back to normality, after slaying the Jabberwocky, she is significantly more confident and decisive. She says to Hamish out right that she can't marry him and that he is not the man for her. She then goes to Margret and says "I love you... but this is my life, I'll decide what to do with it." She assumes control over her life and stops letting others control her destiny. She remarks to Lowell, seen cheating on her sister earlier on in the movie, that she'll "be watching (him) very closely".

Alice's decision to take over the family business, sailing onto travel routes around the world is considered a brave act bearing in mind the expectations placed upon her at that time and that would've been drilled into her from a young age. Get married. Marry rich, marry within social status, just get married otherwise "you'll end up like Aunt Imogen", a spinster. Her self reliance is a nod to "girl power" not needing men for financial or emotional support, instead valuing personal growth, independence and strength: a message meant for modern audiences. 5 In the opening scenes, Aunt Imogen awaits her prince to come. At the end of the movie, Alice tells her to stop deluding herself about a prince that does not exist and calls her to awaken her own power before Alice embarks on her own career, a bold choice. Absolem in his new form, a butterfly (symbol of freedom) is there with Alice as she embarks on her journey. He shares her metaphorical rebirth and they are free from the not-so-mythical terrors the pressure of society and marriage meant for women in these times. 2