



Alice in Wonderland

1865

Lewis Carroll

A surreal fantasy story, 'Alice in Wonderland' is one of the first novels of the 'literary nonsense' genre. Clever in its use of word play, it depicts the frustrations of childhood and appeals to both boys and girls. Its language is formal and vocabulary sophisticated.



CONTENTS

Overview for teachers



	<i>Page</i>
Context	3
• About the author	
• What's the story about?	
• Themes to look out for	
Literary techniques	4–8
Characters	
• Alice	
• The White Rabbit	
• The Queen	
• Other characters	
Setting	
• Real land and Wonderland	
Narrative techniques	
Structure	
Language	
Special feature	
• Dialogue	

Activities for children



▶ Before reading	10–11
Ideas for getting started – Engaging with the world of the novel	
• Children of the revolution	
• Debate	
• Pictures and objects	
• About the author	
▶ During reading	12–17
Stopping places – Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques	
1 End of Chapter 3	
2 End of Chapter 4	
3 End of Chapter 7	
4 End of Chapter 8	
5 End of Chapter 12	
6 The end of the novel	
▶ After reading	18–19
Create and imagine – Developing a personal response to the novel	
• An audience with Alice	
• Magical potions	
• Dream worlds	
• Word play	



Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, 'and what is the use of book,' thought Alice, 'without pictures or conversation?'



Overview for teachers



Context

About the author

Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson who was born in 1832 in England. He was an incredibly intelligent boy who stammered and suffered from ill health. He was home-tutored for much of his childhood and hated school when he did attend. As well as being a keen storyteller, he was also a mathematician, inventor and photographer. *Alice in Wonderland* was written for a young girl, Alice Liddell, whose family Carroll was friends with. *Alice in Wonderland* was a huge success when published. Despite his wealth and growing fame, Carroll continued to teach.

What's the story about?

Alice, the heroine of the novel, is sitting on a bank with her sister, feeling tired and restless with nothing to do, except maybe sleep or drift off into a daydream. Interrupting her languid reverie is a talking white rabbit who is late! Alice's curiosity is piqued and she decides to follow him into a large rabbit hole without considering the consequences.

Down the rabbit hole she goes and she enters a world of riddles, unanswered questions, frustrations, dilemmas and encounters with strange and exotic characters. Amongst the many figures she meets are the ever-smiling Cheshire Cat, the infuriating Mad Hatter and the abominable Queen of Hearts who strikes fear into everyone, demanding their head if they do not obey or please her.

Alice is dismissed, told off and shouted at, but it is the final scene in the courtroom where Alice finally asserts herself amongst this brash, bossy assortment of odd characters. It is also the point at which she wakes up and returns to 'dull' reality.

The novel ends with a warming, wistful section showing Alice's sister dreaming. She thinks of Alice as a child and believes she can hear some of the Wonderland characters Alice spoke of, but only just. Finally, she reflects upon her younger sibling's life as a grown woman, telling tales of Wonderland to other children.

Themes to look out for

- Innocence of childhood
- Dreams
- Isolation
- Frustration
- Risk
- Adventure
- Growing up
- Child versus authority figures



Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Alice

Alice is the innocent and well-mannered heroine of the novel and is depicted in a very sympathetic way by Carroll, who intends for the reader to be on her side when she encounters the set of unreasonable characters.

Often she is referred to by the noun phrase 'poor Alice'; her language is fretful - 'Oh dear'; she looks 'anxiously' and sometimes speaks 'timidly'. Retaining a sense of humility, the reader sees her gain confidence and control as the novel progresses. She discovers and understands, through experiment, how much of the mushroom to eat to become a certain size and when the Queen demands she hold her tongue at the end of the novel, Alice retorts 'I won't!', symbolically growing to her full size at the same time.

She is a resilient and imaginative child who is described as 'burning with curiosity' and bored by lessons - '...always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn't like that!'. She is also sensitive, adventurous, humble, considerate and sometimes rather hard on herself. Carroll portrays her as having great emotional empathy and humanity, particularly in the scene with the sobbing Mock Turtle, stating 'She pitied him deeply.'

She is the only individual in the novel that has a developed, complex character. She is not perfect; she sometimes gets angry, forgetful, destroys things, but all without malice and often with well-founded indignation. She is the only character that shows change when everyone is assembled once more in the courtroom.

The White Rabbit

This is a character under pressure! His dialogue is in short sentences and liberally punctuated with exclamation marks, also highlighting his impatience and anger with everyone around him. All his movements are hurried.

He uses imperative verbs, 'catch him', 'run home', 'fetch me', portraying him as a character who is used to being in charge and having people do things for him. His house is neat with his name engraved on a 'bright brass plate', once more highlighting his important social status, and his room is tidy suggesting a certain fastidiousness.

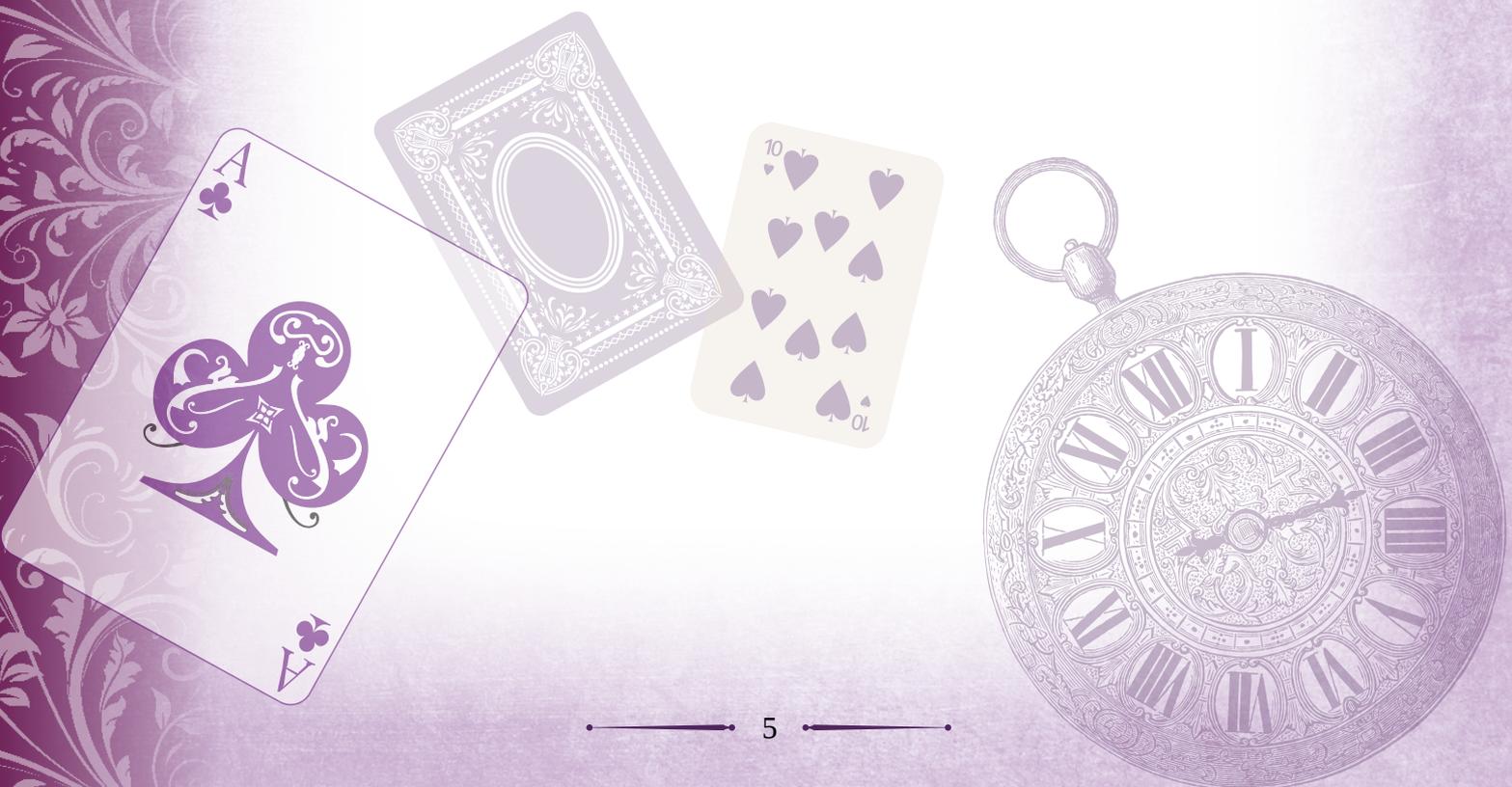
His pomposity is gently mocked by Carroll when he ends up being dropped in the cucumber frame by Alice. The exchange of dialogue between the White Rabbit and one of his unhurried gardeners sharply contrasts and is a technique that further emphasises the White Rabbit's impatience. Towards the end of the novel, the White Rabbit's superior social status is reinforced when he is obviously part of royal circles. He is at the croquet game sycophantically 'smiling at everything that was said' and later stands next to the King in the courtroom.

The Queen

A temperamental tyrant, feared by all including her husband, the King. Everyone is compliant, obliging and lucky to keep their heads. They 'bow low' and even have to paint roses a colour other than their natural state to please her. Portrayed in an extremely uncomplimentary way, her dialogue is described as roaring, screaming or shouting; and she is compared to 'a wild beast' with a 'shrill, loud voice'. Like the White Rabbit, her dialogue is written in short sentences, using imperative verbs and punctuated with exclamation marks to highlight her tyrannical, impatient nature.

Other characters

All the characters in the novel, apart from Alice, are caricatures - personality types that never change or develop. The Caterpillar is always languid, the Hatter always posing riddles, the Mock Turtle always depressed and sobbing, the Queen is always tyrannical.



Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress



Real land and Wonderland

'Real' land bookends the novel and is Alice's home. It is a place of structure and formality, where she gets bored, has to go in for tea and eventually grows old, but it is also a place full of love and affection. Wonderland by comparison, is a place where anything is possible!

None of the settings in Wonderland are stable - doors that were never there suddenly appear or disappear and like a dream, the characters may be in a house one moment then suddenly next to a sea, talking to a Mock Turtle!

Anything is possible for an author when the setting for a novel is in another world. The writer is no longer bound by the conventions of real life and can write critically about someone or something without naming them directly and without fear of persecution. This is known as allegory and has been used to great effect by other authors such as George Orwell and Jonathan Swift. Carroll makes many comments about the society of his time within this novel – about education, law, royalty, politicians - but is safe from any retribution from his peers because of the setting!

Narrative techniques

Written in the third person narrative, the author or narrator adopts an omniscient (all-knowing) position, presenting everything, all the action and thoughts of each character, so that the reader sees things from a different perspective. Sometimes the author may tell the story without bias; sometimes the author makes their presence felt. Carroll does make his presence felt at times in *Alice in Wonderland*, manipulating the reader to side with Alice. For example, in his repetition of 'poor Alice' we, as readers, are meant to feel sorry for her. He also makes authorial intrusions with his use of parentheses to inform, mock a character or talk to the reader directly.

Carroll is quite honest in his depiction of Alice; not only is she humble, generous and sympathetic, but she sometimes speaks 'sharply', gets angry, likes to show off her knowledge and is concerned with what others think of her. However, he is not damning of her; he finds her characteristics endearing.

Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



The time frame of the novel lasts approximately one afternoon and starts and ends in the 'real' world. The land of Wonderland, though chronologically structured, is without any sense of 'real' time. The action in Wonderland moves swiftly without any explanation or sense. Any moments of crisis are dealt with by a sudden change of location or discovery.

Language

The description in *Alice in Wonderland* is focused mainly on adverbs. When adjectives are used they are simple noun phrases, for example, 'White Rabbit', 'pink eyes', 'poor Alice', 'lovely garden' rather than passages of elaborate description. Carroll gives the reader just enough information to begin to imagine - the rest is up to us.

Puns or wordplay are a feature of the novel and add to the frustrations and riddles that Alice has to work her way through. They also add a sense of enjoyment and create humorous moments for the reader: 'We called him Tortoise because he taught us.' - *The Mock Turtle*.

Exclamation marks are used in abundance to show the shock, surprise, outrage, anger and impatience of the characters, fitting in with the adventure genre. Hyphens occur frequently to depict interruption and hesitation. Carroll also uses a lot of parentheses (brackets) to interrupt the narrative and show the reader he is talking to them directly rather than merely just telling a story.

Parentheses are used for a variety of effects, for example:

- To inform the reader - '(Dinah was the cat)'
- To gently mock his characters - '(For, with all her knowledge of history, Alice had no very clear notion how long ago anything had happened.)'
- To talk to the reader directly, '(...fancy curtsying as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?)'

Special feature

Dialogue

An author uses dialogue as a tool to shape characters and to influence the way a reader responds to a character.



Alice

She has the most varied dialogue of all the characters reflecting the idea that she is a complex character and not a caricature. Her language changes to reflect her mood. She is polite using 'please' frequently and she uses a variety of sentence structures asking lots of questions to highlight her curious nature. She is formal even when exasperated, 'It is enough to drive one crazy!'

The White Rabbit

He is a prolific user of imperative verbs and exclamation marks. This sometimes serves to highlight his commanding manner, at other times shows his fear and worries. Notice how his speech changes depending on who he is with.

The Queen

Like the White Rabbit, her dialogue generally begins with an imperative verb and ends with an exclamation. Her short and snappy sentences emphasise her dictatorial nature. She commands and expects everyone to obey - no explanations, no negotiation.

The Dodo

His language is formal, solemn and business-like; no one in real conversation speaks this way. Carroll was mocking people who spoke in such a pompous, laboured manner suggesting that it should be an extinct way of speaking.

The Caterpillar

His languidness is shown through his very short sentences, as though he can hardly be bothered to speak. This is highlighted further when contrasted against Alice's longer dialogue.

The Gryphon

One of the friendliest creatures Alice meets, he speaks in dialect, like the White Rabbit's gardeners, and makes grammatical errors, '...they never executes nobody, you know...' and '...she wants for to know your history, she do...'



Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

Children of the revolution

Research what it must have been like to be a wealthy child in the 1800s.

What toys did children have to play with in the 19th century?

Make a collection of well-known children's literature/nursery rhymes popular during the Victorian period.

Debate

How and why has language changed since the 1800s?

Should we protect endangered animals or let nature take its course?

What is time and why is it important?

Why do we have rules?

Who imposes them and for what purpose?

What does being a child mean to you? What should it mean?

Pictures and objects

What would you do if you found a mysterious bottle labelled 'Drink Me'? How can we keep safe when we find potions we are unsure about?

Explore a range of images and paintings showing surreal and mysterious landscapes by artists such as Dali and Escher. What words would you use to describe such landscapes? How might it feel to be swept into the pictures?

Look at a range of historical paintings or artefacts from the 1800s. What clues do the pictures and objects give about life at this time, especially for children.

About the author

Look at a picture of Lewis Carroll. What type of a man does he look like?

Who was Lewis Carroll and when was he alive?

Who were his contemporaries?



During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques



Read to the end of Chapter 3 *A Causus Race and a Long Tale*

Focus on...

- *First impressions of Alice*
- *The type of story Alice in Wonderland is*
- *The purpose of Carroll's narrative and his word play*



Things to discuss

Plot: Where might this story be leading the reader? Are you happy to follow? What is the novel going to be about?

Character: What characters are you introduced to? What role might they play? How do you feel about them?

What do you find out about Alice? What do you think of her? What does the narrator think of her? Is she someone you could be friends with? Why?

Apart from a short exclamation from the White Rabbit, we only hear Alice talking in the first chapter. Why has Carroll done this?

Style: Are there any patterns in the style of writing?

Narrative: Why does Carroll interrupt narrative with parentheses? Whose point of view do we have when he does this? Who is the narrator addressing? What effect does it have on the reader? Do you like the technique? How does it make you feel?

Language: Look at all the hyphens Carroll uses - why does he use them?

Look at the Dodo's language. Why does he speak differently to the other creatures? How would you describe his dialogue?

The Mouse tells Alice in Chapter 3 that he has a 'sad tale', she replies, 'It is a long tail...but why do you call it sad?' Discuss Carroll's use of puns. Why does he use them? Is it for humorous purposes only or could it be to show confusion and misunderstanding between Alice and everyone around her?

You could...

Make a giant wall display mapping Alice's chronological journey through Wonderland.

2

Read to the end of Chapter 4 *The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill*

Focus on...

- *The presentation of the White Rabbit*



Things to discuss

Character: What's your impression of the White Rabbit? Is he important? What role might he play in the story? Has his manner changed since we met in Chapter 1? Why does he make another appearance now? Would you have expected to see him sooner?

What do you think of him mistaking Alice for Mary Ann? How does the White Rabbit make Alice feel? How does he make you feel?

Symbolism: Why does Carroll have Alice growing too large for the house? What might it symbolise?

Structure: Why does the reader overhear action and conversation in this chapter rather than seeing it? For example, the White Rabbit falling into the cucumber-frame and his subsequent conversation with Pat, the gardener.

3

Read to the end of Chapter 7 *A Mad Tea Party*

Focus on...

- The presentation of all the characters so far
- Alice becoming wiser and more in control



Things to discuss

Character: What do you think of all the characters Alice has been meeting? They are either severe, unfriendly or timid. Why? Do you know anyone who shares these characteristics?

Why do they all argue or make things difficult for her? Why won't they answer her questions? How would you react to this motley cast of characters? Whose side are you on?

Why hasn't the writer provided Alice with a friend? Does it affect how you feel about her?

What impressions do you have of the Queen from the other characters?

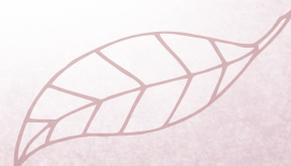
Narrative: Who does the narrator want you to sympathise with?

Language: How does the use of riddles and word play in Chapter 12 make you feel?

Structure: Do you like the idea that things (escape routes) appear out of nowhere? Which is the strangest chapter so far? Why?

You could...

Collect evidence on the variety of characters Alice comes across in the story and create a pack of 'Top Trump' cards, creating your own categories. Some category suggestions might be *Degree of Frustration*, *Friendliness*, *Danger Level*, *Height*, *Weight* and more. Write rules and instructions for players. Invite a friend to play a game of Wonderland Top Trumps.



4

Read to the end of Chapter 8 *The Queen's Croquet Ground*

Focus on...

- *Presentation of the Queen*
- *Impressions of the 'lovely garden'*
- *Effect of overhearing dialogue on the reader*



Things to discuss

Setting: What's your impression of the 'lovely garden' Alice has been yearning to get to?

Structure: Why does Carroll begin the chapter with Alice overhearing an argument? What effect does it have on you?

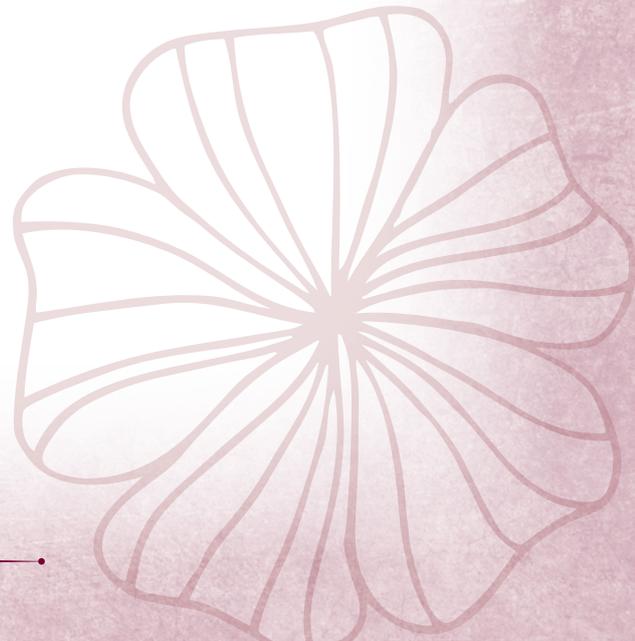
Character: How is the Queen presented in this chapter? How do others react to her? How does she speak? What adverbs are used by Carroll to describe her? How does he want you to feel about her? Does he succeed? Is she made fun of?

Why does the Cheshire Cat make another appearance here?

What more do you learn about the White Rabbit?

You could...

Hold a casting meeting and decide which famous actors you would like to see in the main roles for a new film or theatre production of *Alice in Wonderland*.





Read to the end of Chapter 12 *Alice's Evidence*

Focus on...

- Alice growing as a person, literally and metaphorically



Things to discuss

Structure: After all the shouting and mayhem caused by the Queen in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 becomes quiet, focussing on the depression of the Mock Turtle. Why has Lewis Carroll done this? What further insights does this chapter offer about Alice's character?

You could...

Create a mood chart showing Alice's different moods as she journeys through Wonderland.

or

Create a 'role on the wall'. Draw an outline of Alice and fill the inside space with words and phrases to describe her character, appearance and behaviour.



6

Read to the end of the novel

Focus on...

- How the novel ends
- Your response to the novel as a whole



Things to discuss

Character: Why does the writer have Alice wake up at the moment she asserts herself and rebels against the Queen?

Why are all the characters in *Alice in Wonderland* caricatures except for Alice? Why has Carroll included so many characters that frustrate and argue with her?

What did you think of the ending? How else could the story have ended?

The Setting: How many settings are there? Which is your favourite? How might setting a story in a 'Wonderland' help you as writer? How might it differ to a real-life setting? Does Alice fit comfortably within the two worlds or is she in conflict?

Prediction: There is a sequel to *Alice in Wonderland* called *Through the Looking Glass*. Discuss what you would have happen in the sequel. What characters would you include from 'Wonderland'? What new characters would you introduce? Where would you set the story and what would be Alice's objective? Would Alice be the same age or older?

Dialogue: What are the differences between the ways each character speaks? What does it tell you about their personalities? Whose speech patterns are most similar to your own way of speaking? What does this say about you?

Narrative: Who do you think the narrator likes and dislikes? What evidence do you have for your opinion? How aware are you of the narrator? Do you trust the narrator?

Describe the difference it might have made to the novel and your enjoyment and understanding if the narrator had been Alice.

After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

An audience with Alice

Conduct an interview with Alice for a topical magazine-style TV or radio programme. Use role play to create the character of Alice, a celebrity presenter and other studio guests. Prepare questions to find out about her time in Wonderland, how she felt while she was there, how she feels now and what she has learnt from the experience.



Magical potions

Make a range of potions that can make magical things happen. Use fruit drinks and colouring to create interesting liquids and bottle your creations in decorative containers. Look again at the novel and remind yourself of Alice's style of speech. Imitating her language style, write labels explaining what each potion does.

Dream worlds

The novel has a strange dream-like quality and ends with Alice waking up. Discuss dreams you have had in small groups and describe one you can remember. Use drama to bring one of your dreams to life. Try to capture the strange and vivid nature of dreams in your improvisation.

In groups, create a sequence of still images to tell the story of Alice's adventures during her time in Wonderland. Combine images into a longer piece using music or movement to link them together. Perform your sequence for an audience.



Word play

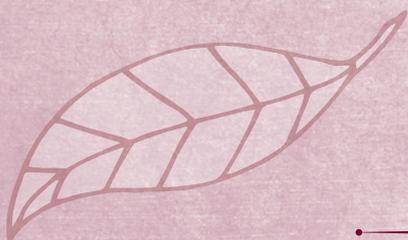
Re-read the Duchess' cruel lullaby in Chapter 6 *Pig and Pepper*
*'Speak roughly to you little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases.'*

Notice the pattern of the rhyme scheme ABAB (lines 1 and 3 rhyme, lines 2 and 4 rhyme).

Experiment with writing your own verses of poetry using this rhyme scheme.

Perhaps your verses could demonstrate a kinder way of treating young children!

Re-read the Mouse's Tale in Chapter 3, *A Caucus Race and a Long Tale*, which is an example of shape poetry. Find other examples of this form of poetry in which the shape of the poem matches the subject matter. Choose a simple shape and write a poem of your own imitating this style of poetry.



Memorable quotes

Alice

I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle!

The Duchess

If everybody minded their own business, the world would go around a great deal faster than it does.

Alice

If it had grown up, it would have made a dreadfully ugly child; but it makes rather a handsome pig, I think.

The Cat

We're all mad here.

The Hatter

Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at.

The Duchess

Out, tut, child! Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.

The Mock Turtle

We called him Tortoise because he taught us.

The King

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop.

The Queen

Sentence first - verdict afterwards.

Alice

You're nothing but a pack of cards!

Alice

A cat may look at a king. I've read that in some book, but I don't remember where.

Alice

It would be so nice if something made sense for a change.

Mad Hatter

No wonder you're late. Why, this watch is exactly two days slow.

Alice

It was much pleasanter at home, when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller, and being ordered about by mice and rabbits.

Alice

Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin; but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!



'Wake up, Alice dear!' said her sister. 'Why, what a long sleep you've had!'

'Oh, I've had such a curious dream!' said Alice, and she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange Adventures of hers that you have just been reading about; and when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said, 'It was a curious dream, dear, certainly: but now run in to your tea; it's getting late.' So Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been.

“I liked this book because of its crazy characters and I think it’s entertaining. The character of Alice to me is a bit strange, but she makes the book what it is, and what it is, is great!”

Lily, age 10

“Curiouser and curiouser!”

Alice, Alice in Wonderland

“The clue to the enduring fascination and greatness of the Alice books lies in language....It is play, and word-play, and its endless intriguing puzzles which continue to reveal themselves long after we have ceased to be children.”

A. S. Byatt, Author

Telephone: 03333 20 8000

Email: support@cornerstoneseducation.co.uk

www.cornerstoneseducation.co.uk

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