



# CHECKMATE:

## Sources of Power in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



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**STUDENT ESSAY**  
*Golden Age of Children's  
Literature Course*

TOP: *Alice's Adventures in  
Wonderland and Through  
the Looking-Glass.*  
John Tenniel (1885)

Thanks to Disney, it is probably safe to assume that most Americans can recognize the Cheshire Cat even without having read the 1865 publication of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The cartoon adaptation is quite faithful to Carroll's original plot: a young girl named Alice falls down a rabbit hole and finds herself in an outrageously fantastical world, Wonderland. While there she encounters food that makes her grow and shrink, animals who speak, an unceasingly outraged Queen, and much more. Ultimately, however, Alice wakes up to realize that her curious adventure was all a dream.

Due to Wonderland's eccentricity, Alice's journey has lent itself to a multitude of adaptations through film, theater, and even other books. One distinguished reimagination of *Alice* is Salvador Dalí's 1969 illustrated edition of the story. Dalí's abstract, colorful illustrations vary greatly

**SOURCE:** *THE MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARIES*

“In contrast to these dreamlike images, Alice is dependably recognizable as she skips rope through every page.”



ABOVE: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Salvador Dalí (1969)

OPPOSITE PAGE: *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. John Tenniel (1899)

from John Tenniel's black and white illustrations of the original text. Due to his position as the chief political cartoonist at *Punch* magazine for decades, Tenniel was a significant illustrator of the 19th century independent of *Alice*. His contribution to what would become one of the most well-known children's books in history established not only the world's first visualization of Wonderland, but the artist's own legacy. *Alice's* original art interprets Carroll's words literally and depicts the fantastical characters of Wonderland in realistic modes. Dalí, on the other hand, took an entirely different route. Dalí's illustrations offer a more abstract view: bold colors melt together across blurred lines, and a distortion of perspective often present lends to the depiction of Alice's constant growing and shrinking throughout Carroll's novel. For Dalí, *Alice* was an incredibly rich text to navigate through a surrealist lens as it not only provided a dreamlike setting of Wonderland, replete with surreal situations, but also a curious protagonist eager to explore this world despite, and perhaps because of, its absurdity. Carroll's discussion of time in the Mad Hatter's tea party practically invited the incorporation of one of Dalí's famous melting clocks into the surrealist's illustration. Alice's exploratory and childlike nature is consistently depicted in Dalí's illustrations by a shadow figure of a young girl skipping rope present on every page, which seems to remind readers to look at Wonderland with all the open-mindedness of a child.

While such imagery of childish innocence features heavily in Dalí's work, Dalí's *Alice* illustrations also emphasize another significant facet of Carroll's novel: motifs of different power dynamics. In Carroll's fictional world, just like our real one, power is a central concern for the inhabitants of

Wonderland and there are many sources of power from which people draw to obtain and maintain influence over others. One source is knowledge, or the awareness of facts accumulated either through lessons, research, or first-hand experience. While the growth of knowledge may correlate with the advancement of age, Carroll's *Alice* reminds readers that one does not guarantee the other. Another source of power that *Alice* reflects on is social status. Whether it be a royal title or a comfortable spot in the upper class, a person's social status is often determined by birth. It gives certain people a natural advantage, and sometimes a source of power, over those of a lower status. Lastly, Carroll explores the value of stature as yet another significant source of power in *Alice*, particularly in respect to a person's physical size when greater than that of their peers. Stature is similar to social status in that we have very little influence over the extent of our stature because it is largely determined through hereditary genetics. This source of power is more visible to non-analytical eyes; however, its importance is worthy of analysis. Intimidation through superior knowledge, higher status, and even physical size are all indicators of power, but *Alice* suggests that these traditional sources merely create a temporary illusion of influence, while only a person's ability to defend their positions through sound logic will provide them with sustainable power. Produced nearly 100 years after *Alice's* original publication, Dalí's surrealist illustrations reflect this same theme by artistically depicting the irrationality of Wonderland through the artist's use of radiant colors and unorthodox proportions. In contrast to these dreamlike images, Alice is dependably recognizable as she skips rope through every page, suggesting perhaps that a sense of reality and consistency is necessary to traverse even the most nonsensical of worlds. ☀

