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This story is an analysis piece focused on my own observations. It focuses on my own personal examination of the values of each piece while incorporating evidence from the piece's themselves and other scholars. All papers/sources have been cited. Please support the official release of each movie/game.

A Unique Brand of Muchness: The True Message of Alice's Stories

"I invite you to a world where there is no such thing as time and every creature lends themselves to change your state of mind" (Smith).

When examining the vast world of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, and other well-known authors, one particular story stands out as the subject of countless rewrites. This tale is none other than Lewis Carroll's ludicrous *Alice in Wonderland*. What began as a nonsensical anecdote has been revised by numerous artists, many of which drastically alter Carroll's original universe. Upon further inspection of each version's plotline, however, it appears that the characters, settings, and plots are not the only major changes. The core messages of each version are equally diverse. Because of *Wonderland*'s interpretive nature, Carroll's tale allows for creative subliminal messaging on the part of the artist. These subtle themes have the potential to transform what appears to be a mere nonsensical fairy tale into a significant story with applicable moral battles of right and wrong. The distinct message of each story is certainly noteworthy because it offers an entirely new perspective for viewers regarding which adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* is best suited for their ages or preferences. Although there are many adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland*, the versions that display this hidden content

most strikingly are Walt Disney's animated movie, Tim Burton's sequel to the original story, and American McGee's horrific yet exhilarating video game.

"The girl who chased the rabbit, drank the wine, and took the pill has locked herself in limbo to see how it truly feels" (Smith).

Although it was released over five decades ago, one of the most familiar variations of *Alice in Wonderland* is Walt Disney's animated movie. The film begins with a golden-haired, blue-eyed Alice who cannot comprehend the appeal of her sibling's dull history book ("Alice in Wonderland 1951"). Slipping into a daydream, the child visits a nonsensical place known as Wonderland and proceeds to disrupt the lives of its bizarre residents ("Alice in Wonderland 1951"). At the movie's conclusion, Alice finally begins to value realism as her fantasies verge on society's depiction of madness ("Alice in Wonderland 1951"). Upon tackling the film adaptation, Disney desired to emphasize the magical elements of the tale (Callen). His goal was to turn Carroll's work into an adventure that most people could enjoy rather than reproduce the original story verbatim ("Alice in Wonderland 1951"). Unfortunately, this dream was only half-realized. In his quest for "fluffy entertainment," Disney, perhaps inadvertently, created a piece containing a shallow plot that epitomizes several Victorian era stereotypes and questionable themes.

At the climax of her Wonderland exploits, Alice reaches an emotional breaking point in which her dreams become nightmares ("Alice in Wonderland 1951"). At first glance, this detail is a mere plot twist; however, it seems to underlie an unpleasant message—little girls should not "have their heads in the clouds." Scholar Eman AbdalKarim agrees with this statement, stating in his report that the film essentially ignores the importance of imagination in children, instead vaguely supporting the gender restrictions of the Victorian era (AbdalKarim). Other scholars state that the film goes as far as to punish children for daring to daydream by emphasizing the

terror Alice endures while surrounded by mad creatures (Ross 58). Upon uncovering these questionable ideas, a discerning viewer cannot help but wonder—is this movie truly appropriate for children?

From the standpoint of “watching a movie for the cartoon rather than the story,” the answer is likely to be “yes.” However, the opposite endeavor, “watching the movie for its moral value,” is doomed to fail. As scholars have pointed out, the film is riddled with hints of hallucinogens and sexism, ironically making what is supposedly viewed as a “child-friendly” variation of Alice into a terrible role model for girls (AbdalKarim). Therefore, as affirmed by many researchers, the 1951 story may be guilty of being one of the least appropriate adaptations of the 1865 story, despite Disney’s “child friendly” intentions. Its portrayal of drugs and prejudice, while subconscious, are triggers for parental disapproval. Regretfully, it seems that Walt Disney’s endeavor to keep the story fantastical resulted in insubstantial characters and a virtue-devoid plotline. This examination can only lead viewers to conclude that Disney’s tale is severely lacking in moral value and is perhaps unsuitable for the young audience for which it is intended.

“Through the looking glass we see she’s faithfully returned, but now off with her head I fear is everyone’s concern” (Smith).

Striding the fine line between “suitable for general audiences” and “suitable for appropriate audiences,” Tim Burton’s live action *Alice in Wonderland* harbors quite a different theme than Disney’s animated film. This theme is the destruction of female stereotypes and gender roles—an ideal that is virtually the opposite of the aforementioned cartoon. The tale features a nineteen-year-old Alice Kingsleigh, who deflects the pressure to marry a lord and travels to a place she visited as a child: Underland (“Alice in Wonderland 2010”).

Embarking on an incredible adventure, she reunites with her quirky childhood friends, vanquishes the dreaded Jabberwocky, and returns to England to help establish a new trade route (“Alice in Wonderland 2010”).

The core distinction of this story is strikingly clear within the first ten minutes of the film. Unlike the Disney version, which, as illustrated before, embraces the stereotype of a “repressed female,” Tim Burton’s work appears to encourage Alice to break away from societal norms. Some scholars argue that Burton’s Alice is a completely different character than the original Alice—one who is literally unable to fulfill the “dutiful wife” role of a Victorian era female (Aikens 28). Moreover, the movie contradicts Disney’s subliminal message of the danger of a wild imagination by encouraging such an attribute. A recurring line throughout the film proclaims that “all the best people” are mad, which leads scholar Jeffrey C. Callen to suggest that Burton presents insanity as a gift rather than a curse (Callen). Alice essentially “goes mad” by accepting her unique, adventurous spirit and chooses to pursue the apprenticeship she desires rather than the horrid marriage society attempts to force upon her (Callen).

Contrastingly, the aforementioned cartoon ends with Alice accepting that pragmatism trumps the lure of imagination (“Alice in Wonderland (1951)”). On a more basic level, this divergence is perhaps tantamount to Disney’s film suggesting that it is wrong to dream and Burton’s film teaching that daring to dream is a vital quality. While more mature than the Disney movie, the film imparts this message with surprising levity. Reviewers of the live-action movie agree that Burton realizes his vision of a new, grown-up Alice without weaving dark or frightening themes into the storyline (“A Sneak Peak Into Tim Burtons...”). The film goes as far as to lighten the mood of the epic battle scene with the Mad Hatter performing a quirky dance once the Jabberwocky has been slain (“Alice in Wonderland 2010”). Combined with its uplifting

messages, this could mean that the action-filled film is better suited for the minds of children than its animated counterpart. In spite of its positive nature, however, this lightheartedness also results in the movie incorporating a magical air that is still somewhat difficult to apply to everyday life. Thus, while the movie is ideal for a young audience in need of positive role models, it lacks the substantial, reality-centered lessons suited for the older audience it targets with its PG rating.

“Sometimes the curiosity can kill the soul but leave the pain and every ounce of innocence is left inside her brain” (Smith).

The third version of *Alice in Wonderland*, American McGee’s *Alice: Madness Returns*, is a video game that accommodates a limited audience, yet presents what is feasibly one of the most intricate moral battles. Recovering from her bout with insanity in the game’s prequel, Alice Liddell is the primary patient of psychiatrist Angus Bumby, who attempts to use psychoanalytic techniques to make Alice forget the fire that killed her family (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Whenever Alice suffers a psychotic break, she is transported to Wonderland, a gruesome manifestation of her damaged mind (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). As she reconstructs her painful memories, Alice realizes that Bumby is responsible for the fire (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Furthermore, he is destroying his patients’ psyches in order to sell them into prostitution (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”).

While disturbing, McGee’s twist on *Alice in Wonderland* presents the most realistic life lesson out of these three particular versions. Walt Disney’s *Wonderland* is vague in its definition, appearing to exist as either an irrational alternate dimension or a hallucinogenic daydream (“Alice in Wonderland 1951”). Tim Burton’s *Underland* is definitely a physical location, yet it remains a magical world (“Alice in Wonderland 2010”). Conversely, American McGee’s,

Wonderland is deliberately theoretical—a ghastly expression of Alice’s mental ruin (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Before the story has a chance to unfold, players cannot help sensing the deeper connotation of McGee’s twist on Carroll’s work simply by viewing the intense landscape. It is not dark for the sake of retaining its place in the horror genre. Every grisly aspect of the environment is intentional. Gaming companies support this idea, pointing out that the gruesome details serve as visual evidence that something or someone is tampering with Alice’s mind, determined to prevent her from retrieving her memories (“Alice: Madness Returns”).

Wonderland’s sections are divided into unique landscapes such as the Hatter’s Domain, which is a demented amalgamation of steampunk gears and massive tea party utensils (McGee 80). As a manifestation of her unconscious, it is the only place where Alice can find the truth regarding the true monster behind her family’s murder (“Alice: Madness Returns”). In spite of its countless lethal traps, Wonderland is typically more inviting than London: the decrepit, unsanitary, villainous dimension of reality (McGee 59). This is yet another shocking yet accurate portrayal—for McGee chooses to feature the dirty streets of 19th century London rather than the lovely engagement party shown in the live-action movie (“Alice in Wonderland (2010)”).

In addition to her environment, Alice Liddell is a far cry from her original description, sporting long, dark hair, a gaunt figure, and piercing green eyes (McGee 46). Her dress has faded from baby blue to indigo, with black and white striped tights and buckle-covered combat boots (McGee 46). While potent, these diversities pale in comparison to the uniqueness of the plot. As summarized by gaming journalists, Alice embarks on a dangerous journey consisting of piecing together her shattered mind and discovering what reality has been hiding from her (Turi). Unlike Disney and Burton’s protagonists, however, Alice Liddell has virtually no allies. With her

relatives deceased, she is left to the mercy of her prostitute nanny, her family's wicked lawyer, her blackmailing nurse, and her shrewd psychiatrist—all of whom are treacherous to some degree (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Each individual harbors his or her own motives, which is a far better representation of human nature than the merely “good” or “evil” characters present in other *Alice in Wonderland* adaptations. More importantly, their intricate natures lead to the major moral of McGee's story—Alice must look to her own memories and experiences to expose the truth rather than relying on the lies and biases of those around her. She is rebuked for her reliance on outsiders by the Queen of Hearts, who accurately accuses Alice of blinding herself to the truth because she will not face reality (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”).

After hearing the Queen's lecture, Alice endures a ghastly mental trip through her old asylum (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Bound in a straight-jacket, the girl is forced to hear the words of her deceitful “real world” contacts, all of whom assert that Alice will be forever mad if she does not bend to their wills (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Thus enlightened, Alice finally realizes that Dr. Angus Bumby, her psychiatrist and supposed protector, murdered her sister before setting fire to the Liddell home (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”). Additionally, Bumby has interfered with Alice's memories because she is the only remaining witness to his crime (“Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki”).

Although this tale is grisly and suitable only for older audiences, its realistic atmosphere and lesson of “facing one's demons” perhaps makes it one of the most morally significant versions of *Alice in Wonderland*. It delves into the gray areas of life and human nature, bringing to light issues that make gamers uncomfortable due to their applicability. McGee confirms this claim, explaining that certain facets of the game are specifically designed to invoke anxiety

because they force players to feel as if they are doing something morally reprehensible (McGee 159). Similarly, the protagonist must shed the mantle of blissful ignorance she has worn for so long and face her greatest demon. She goes as far as to kill Bumby at the game's climax because she knows that, in the real world, it is the only way he will be brought to justice ("Alice: Madness Returns—Alice Wiki"). The characters, the setting, and the plot all weave together to create a complex story in which every element serves a purpose.

While Disney's Wonderland is ludicrous for the sake of absurdity and Burton's Underland is enchanting for the sake of magic, McGee's Wonderland is horrible to illustrate what happens to a person who lets intruders meddle with her mind. It teaches that people must have the courage to look at their surroundings and recognize the true villains in their lives, in spite of the pain that may come from facing reality. To conclude, *Alice: Madness Returns* delivers the most powerful message of these three revisions with its incorporation of realism and the gray areas of life. Although its mature rating makes it inaccessible to many viewers under the age of eighteen, its core content makes it far more relevant to older audiences than the previously analyzed pieces.

"You see there's no real ending. There's only the beginning. Come out and play"
(Smith).

As illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, Alice's "trip down the rabbit hole" is strikingly different depending on the author of her quirky adventure. Walt Disney concentrates on fluffy entertainment while Tim Burton and American McGee use Carroll's piece to epitomize moral battles against self and society that vary in gravity. These differences are noteworthy because viewers can easily look at rating information to understand what kind of movie or game they want to purchase. However, these reviews can only impart a limited amount of information.

A deeper level of analysis is required to truly comprehend the content of commonly rewritten stories such as *Alice in Wonderland*.

Although the suggested age ratings provide information about the film's obvious content, they do not go on to include its underlying themes or messages. For example, Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* may appear the most appropriate option for young children; yet, it is filled with insinuations and role models that parents may find problematic (AbdalKarim). Therefore, Tim Burton's film is a more appropriate option because it openly embraces a righteous theme of young women breaking the domineering mold of society (Aikens 27). For older audiences searching for a more substantial story, Tim Burton's film may not offer a sufficiently gripping plot or relevance to everyday life. American McGee's *Alice: Madness Returns* is therefore the superior choice because of its thrilling plot twists and reality-centered themes. Wonderland, while gothic and enchanting, is acknowledged as a part of Alice's mind rather than a physical location ("Alice: Madness Returns"). The plotline delves into the darkest aspects of human nature, creating a story that is both fascinating and powerful. These unique themes reveal that each adaptation targets a different audience than what is specified by the age rating—an observation that could lead viewers to choose which version they wish to see more carefully. To use a quote from Tim Burton's movie, each Alice harbors her own unique brand of "muchness"—a fact that is crucial in truly understanding and appreciating the various twists on her interpretive tale.

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