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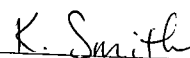
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ABSTRACT

Based on Lewis Carroll's novel "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that he used nonsense and absurdity to comment on reality; and that surrealist painters are also known for including absurd elements in their works. The main activity of the lesson involves students discussing and writing about how both Carroll and the surrealist painters comment on reality. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)



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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

Alice in Wonderland

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Judith B. Heyman, English teacher, Thomas W. Wootton High School,
 Rockville, Maryland.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Lewis Carroll used nonsense and absurdity to comment on reality.
2. Surrealist painters are also known for including absurd elements in their works.

MATERIALS:

For this lesson, you will need:

Reproductions of several surrealist paintings from the 1920s and 1930s

PROCEDURE:

1. Readers and critics of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* point out that the girl's experiences in the world at the bottom of the rabbit hole are similar to the dreams (sometimes, nightmares) that most human beings have. By exploring this observation further, you can help your students connect what Lewis Carroll was doing in words with what the surrealists in the early 20th century were doing with painting. The connection should increase students' appreciation of both modern literature and modern art—and perhaps help students to better understand the historical period of those writers and artists.

Begin this activity by asking students why they would agree with readers and critics who compare Alice's adventures to human dreams or nightmares. Accept answers that are paraphrases of the following statements:

- The readers and critics are probably commenting on how much of Carroll's story is marked by whimsy, fantastic doings, and absurd developments or juxtapositions—just as dreams are.

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- Although reality in the Alice story sometimes seems like the reality we experience when we're fully conscious, more often the reality in the story is more similar to experiences we have in dreams. Alice's world, like many of our dreams, doesn't make logical sense (or so we think).

2. Leave the novel at this point, and explain to students the etymology of the art term *surrealism* by noting that certain painters in the early 20th century said their goal was to paint the “more real than real world behind the real.” Another way of putting this remark is to say that the painters wanted to capture that which is *beyond* reality, a *super* reality, or, in French, *surréalité*—hence, the English term *surrealism*.

3. The next step is to show students examples of surrealist paintings from the 1920s and 1930s. Famous examples include *The Persistence of Memory* and many other works by Salvador Dali and *The False Mirror, Time Transfixed*, and many other works by René Magritte—as well as paintings by Max Ernst and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Ask students which elements in these paintings are as bizarre as the events and juxtapositions in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In answering, students will no doubt comment on the contradiction or paradox of a hard, precise object such as a watch represented as a soft, organic object being eaten by ants (*Persistence*); the ludicrous size of the eye and the imposition of the sky on the eye (*Mirror*); and the impossibility of a smoking locomotive coming out of a closed-off fireplace (*Time*).

4. Push students to try to articulate what these painters may have been saying in their paintings about the society or culture they were living in. Are the painters expecting these impossible possibilities to occur, or are they telling us that the world is simply impossible to fully understand because it's not what it seems to be?

5. Cite the writer Flannery O'Connor, who said that distortion is often a way of leading people to see the truth. Then ask, “What distortions does each painting focus on? What truth do these distortions lead you the viewer to find or think about?”

6. Now return to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Ask, “What distortions do you notice in the book? What truth do these distortions lead you the reader to find or think about?”

7. Complete this activity by asking students to write one or two paragraphs in which they tell what they have learned about how both Carroll and the surrealist painters comment on reality.

ADAPTATIONS:

Instead of dealing with highly sophisticated surrealist paintings, substitute contemporary caricatures that exaggerate features of politicians or of other public figures—caricatures that, in effect, render the person absurd. Help your students see that Carroll, like the cartoonists, is exaggerating also in order to point out people's or society's shortcomings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the elements that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* has in common with fairy tales.
2. Review the characters you have analyzed so far in your literature class. Compare Alice's encounters in Wonderland with the Red Queen to another literary character who encounters a tyrant. In what ways are these encounters similar? In what ways are they different?
3. Analyze in what ways *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be considered a critique of Victorian English life. Your analysis should include politics, education, roles of classes and gender, the court system, as well as the cultural environment.
4. Explain in what ways Alice's adventures are similar to many nightmares we have all experienced.
5. Discuss the symbolic meaning of Alice's journey down the rabbit hole, her attendance at the Mad Hatter's Tea party, and the events at the Red Queen's Party.
6. Explain how the surrealistic elements of time, size, and place distortion add to one's pleasure as an audience in films, art, and literature.

EVALUATION:

You can evaluate your students' written work using the following three-point rubric:

- **Three points:** shows an understanding that both Carroll and the surrealist painters create absurdities as a comment on reality; writes well-organized paragraph(s) with sentence variety and plenty of examples; eliminates errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
- **Two points:** shows an understanding that both Carroll and the surrealist painters create absurdities as a comment on reality; writes clear paragraph(s) but does not vary sentence structure sufficiently or include enough examples; overlooks some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
- **One point:** shows some understanding of Carroll's or the surrealist painters' use of absurdity but does not write about the direct relationship between the writer and the artists; writes in a disorganized fashion; misses many errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

You can ask your students to contribute to the assessment rubric by determining how many examples of absurdities should be cited in students' writing.

EXTENSION:

Creative Comparison of Characters

Many small, weak, young, or innocent characters like Alice encounter characters who frighten or overpower them. Have students write a further adventure for Alice, in which she encounters a character from another literary work. Tell students that their episodes should incorporate Carroll's stylistic devices and philosophic beliefs: distortion, humor, and the triumph of the weak over the strong.

School as Wonderland

Give the following assignment to students: Imagine that a youngster from another planet has just dropped through a hole of sorts and plops onto the floor of the main office of your school. Write a skit that shows which people and activities in your school would seem frightening, bizarre, or silly to such an adventurer.

Have students form groups to do prewriting that will eventually lead to parodies of these people and activities. The prewriting notes should indicate how the writers will distort people and activities for comic effect. Before students begin to draft their skits, introduce the elements of playwriting—dialogue and staging (including movements, props, and costumes).

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Lewis Carroll: A Biography

Morton N. Cohen. Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

This is a definitive biography of Lewis Carroll, the Oxford don and mathematician who wrote the enduring tales of Alice.

Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and A.A. Milne

Jackie Wullschlager. The Free Press, 1995.

Read about these five writers of fantasy whose works have become part of our heritage. Read their letters, memoirs, and diaries, which discuss their childhood, and learn about their lives and the societies in which they lived.

WEB LINKS:

Alice in Wonderland by Project Gutenberg

A public domain copy of e-text of *Alice in Wonderland* is available here for downloading.

http://promo.net/pg/_authors/i-_carroll_lewis_.html

Alice in Wonderland Problems

A wonderful site for using Alice in Wonderland to teach math skills.

<http://www.nrich.maths.org.uk/mathsf/journalf/oct97/probs.html#time>

Lewis Carroll Home Page

From this Web site, access the Lewis Carroll home page, where you will find everything you want to know about the author and his works. Research material at this site is plentiful, as are complete texts.

<http://www.lewiscarroll.org>

Alice in Wonderland

Four vignettes from Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, suitable as a story introduction or to just add visuals to your presentation.

<http://www.stampscapes.com/alice.html>

Alice in Wonderland

An actual photograph of Alice Liddell, Carroll's inspiration for the Alice character. There is also an article on the story and Carroll here.

<http://www.privat.katedral.se/~sp95jema/alice.htm>

VOCABULARY:

allegory

The expression of truths or generalizations about human conduct and experience by means of symbolic figures and actions.

Context:

Alice's adventures may be considered an allegory for the journey from childhood to adulthood.

croquet

A game in which players drive wooden balls with mallets through a series of wickets set out on a lawn.

Context:

Alice played croquet using a hedgehog for a ball.

eccentric

Deviating from established patterns of behavior.

Context:

Lewis Carroll was considered eccentric by many adults who knew him well.

hatter

Someone who makes, sells, or cleans and repairs hats.

Context:

The mad hatter's tea party was a shocking experience for Alice.

looking glass

A mirror.

Context:

For her further adventures in Wonderland, Alice went through the looking glass.

parody

A literary work in which the style of the author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or ridicule.

Context:

Alice's adventures are sometimes seen as a parody of the formal style and rigid manners of Victorian England.

spoof

A light, humorous parody.

Context:

The Red Queen is sometimes considered a spoof of Queen Victoria.

surrealism

A movement in art and literature that tries to express subconscious mental activities through fantastic or incongruous images and the unnatural joining of unrelated ideas.

Context:

Time running backward is a surreal element in Alice's trip.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 6-8, 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts.

Benchmarks:

(6-8) Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of literary forms and genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fantasies, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, tall tales, supernatural tales).

(9-12) Applies reading skills and strategies to a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature).

(9-12) Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of literary forms and genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature, the Bible).

- (9-12)**Identifies the simple and complex actions (e.g., internal/external conflicts) between main and subordinate characters in texts containing complex character structures.
- (9-12)**Makes abstract connections between his or her own life and the characters, events, motives, and causes of conflict in texts.
- (9-12)**Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: literature

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmarks:

Demonstrates an understanding of why certain literary works may be considered classics or works of enduring quality and substance.

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© Video Information and Comprehension Questions



Video Description

Just a children's story? Hardly. Experts explain how "Alice in Wonderland" presents a surreal critique of Victorian England, and appeals to people of all ages because of the way it captures the bewildering state of childhood.

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The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

TITLE OF VIDEO:

Alice in Wonderland

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. What were Lewis Carroll's real name and occupation, and what type of person was he?**
- 2. What is Alice's outstanding character trait that leads her down the rabbit hole? How might an adult have acted differently?**
- 3. The Mad Hatter's Tea Party is one of the most famous scenes in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and is frequently recreated by children and adults. What did the Mad Hatter symbolize during the Victorian Age?**
- 4. Who is the most famous illustrator of Alice's adventures? Why weren't Lewis Carroll's original drawings used in later editions?**
- 5. In what way did Alice's Adventures in Wonderland change the face of children's literature?**
- 6. Who are some of the most famous characters Alice meets on her adventures and what are some of their characteristics that they have in common?**
- 7. Why has Alice's Adventures in Wonderland been so popular through the years?**
- 8. What kind of poetry did Carroll write for his books?**

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Alice in Wonderland

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. What were Lewis Carroll's real name and occupation, and what type of person was he?

Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Dodgson, a mathematics professor at Oxford. He was an extremely shy, scholarly, and eccentric man who loved children but never married.

2. What is Alice's outstanding character trait that leads her down the rabbit hole? How might an adult have acted differently?

Alice's curiosity is what leads her to follow the White Rabbit down his hole. Lewis Carroll seems to celebrate a child's curiosity throughout the story. An adult might have been stopped by fear of the unknown and the related cautionary instincts. Experts feel that the story reflects a child's thirst for life in all of its forms.

3. The Mad Hatter's Tea Party is one of the most famous scenes in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and is frequently recreated by children and adults. What did the Mad Hatter symbolize during the Victorian Age?

Hatters were the gentlemen who made the hats used chemicals like lead to prepare them. This constant exposure to lethal chemicals caused many of the hatters to become mentally ill. The tea party is a journey into the world of the "mad" where time has stopped and choices that are made seem illogical.

4. Who is the most famous illustrator of Alice's adventures? Why weren't Lewis Carroll's original drawings used in later editions?

Sir John Tenniel, an English cartoonist and illustrator, is the most famous illustrator of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Lewis Carroll was dissatisfied with his own drawings and asked the leading cartoonist of the time to illustrate his book.

5. In what way did Alice's Adventures in Wonderland change the face of children's literature?

During the Victorian era childhood was something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Children's books were biblically based and focused on morals. Alice in Wonderland was a unique book for its time and was the first that actually could be considered a "fun" read for children. It actually made fun of the educational system and its emphasis on moral teachings.

6. Who are some of the most famous characters Alice meets on her adventures and what are some of their characteristics that they have in common?

On her adventures, Alice meets the Red Queen, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat, and the Duchess. These authority figures share several common characteristics including cruelty, childlike responses, irresponsible behavior, impulsive decision-making, and self-indulgence. The Red Queen is thought to be a parody of Queen Victoria.

7. Why has Alice's Adventures in Wonderland been so popular through the years?

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is popular because people all over the world can relate to the themes of the bewildering state of childhood, humor, nightmare, and the surreal. It is considered a classic of humor, fantasy, and parody, and has been translated to other languages throughout the world from Arabic to Zulu.

8. What kind of poetry did Carroll write for his books?

Carroll's poetry was often a parody of rigid forms of conventional poetry but using nonsense words. Many of the poems sound familiar because they reflect the style of the original poet. The rhymes also fit perfectly which greatly confused Alice in the story, but which delights children who recognize the play on words.

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