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ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Heather Rivera takes a look through Tim Burton's movie version from a feminist perspective



Alice in Wonderland: HEATHER RIVERA © David Coombe/2010

I must say to start off with that Tim Burton's recreation of Lewis Carroll's classic tale surprised me no end! With a few twists away from the original tale and lovely graphics, Burton has created a masterpiece for women everywhere. Allow me then to take you through a journey down the rabbit hole: together we can explore just how far my feminist interpretation can go. We may feel a few bumps on the way down, but we will emerge stronger and enlightened at the end of this journey.

Feminist in Wonderland

At the beginning we meet Alice (Mia Wasikowska) and her father (Marton Csokas). Alice's father-figure represents the world of ideas and dreams for the girl. Having a very creative mind himself, Alice's father supports his daughter's "strange dreams". "Mad people are always the best," he adds, and this may be true, for new ideas are often seen as madness, but without them, we'd still be in caves. However, anyone who differs from her cultural environment knows how hard it is to trust and stick to her own different mindset – to stick to her guns, so to speak – and so does

Alice. In supporting her ideas, Alice's father is not the typical patriarch we would expect for this time. Oddly, her mother (Lindsay Duncan) fills that roll.

Alice is soon in a coach with her mother – an overpowering, overwhelming type of a woman. She is much more dominant than her father, and has a set of rules Alice must follow: what she can wear, how she will dance, with whom she will associate. Very staunch woman indeed. Alice wants no part of this life, and she even "forgets" to wear her corset – a real sticking point for her mother, as this is improper for a young lady of that period.

Alice is on her way to meet Hamish. Little does she know that Hamish will propose to her in front of all her friends and family. When he does, Alice rejects him and runs off. This is strong move for a young lady during this period. To escape from the harshness of her own reality, Alice follows a white rabbit, or possibly her own imagination, down a rabbit hole. Thus her adventure in Wonderland begins. It is time for Alice to face her inner world, which claims its own logic. Without such independent thinking, the only choice a woman has is to

fit in with pre-established roles and give up her uniqueness (or as Alice would call it, her "munchness").

Thus Alice takes a journey into the unknown. This journey consists of two intertwined aspects: discovering who she is, and becoming courageous. In fact, who she is means who she has always been; but this has been lost or forgotten through her growing up in a social setting where children are told how they must think, behave and feel. In traditional education, both in the family setting and in school, development coincides with being shaped into a predetermined mold, with little care about what the child is within herself. We see this early on in the story when Alice's mother is instructing her what to do and how to do it. Alice is not thrilled with this predetermined path, and decides to break free of it and go her own way.

Alice is not ready for her discoveries at first. In fact most of the characters she meets along the way note that she is not Alice, or "hardly Alice" as the caterpillar Absalom puts it – meaning that when she first lands in Underland, Alice has not evolved into the woman she needs to

become. (We learn that although Alice calls this place 'Wonderland', its true name is 'Underland'.) Is this the real Alice, or is she just an impostor? That's the main motif of the film, and it's a variant of an age-old question: Is this the real me, or just an actor pretending to be what I show to others? Moreover, am I trustworthy? Am I going to make it? Am I strong enough to deal with and overcome the monsters that may come my way? How do I even know what is real?

The Heroine Quest

The story unfolds between fear and compassion. More and more, Alice realizes that her safety depends on the safety of her loved ones, first of all the Mad Hatter (played by Burton protégé Johnny Depp), the manifestation of the wonderfully mad ideas she has been hatching all her life. The Mad Hatter is her alter-ego, or perhaps the person she is deep down, who could exist so colorfully and unpredictably in this sub-world thanks to Alice's father's endorsement. Therefore Alice must save the Hatter to save her own identity.

Now, here's an interesting thing: a male hater who is Alice's inner being. Can a male hater be a feminist? This one certainly can! He truly believes in Alice, and will do anything to help her along her journey. He not only *wants* her to succeed, he also *wants* her to succeed.

As the Mad Hatter talks to Alice, we learn that he is a servant of the White Queen (Anne Hathaway) and that the Red Queen (Burton's wife, Helena Bonham

Carter) has taken over Wonderland. The Red Queen represents authoritarian/patriarchal society, in which tyrannical laws are established, ie, Alice's mother. She is a dominant figure short in stature, thus having what I think of as a Napoleon complex. Everyone will dress and act a certain way, and no person will dare go against the mighty Red Queen. If you cross her it's off with your head. The Red Queen's entire entourage is frightened of her; they do whatever she demands. On the other hand, the White Queen is simply a witch who defies the historical patriarchal idea of witches being evil and wearing black. We could say that she's the Feminine not subdued by or to patriarchal logic. As the Feminine she is set apart: she's not destroyed, but she lives in a separate world. Here in her world Alice finds her the right size – not too reduced, not too oversized, but rather just right, and supportive.

Alice must destroy the power of the Red Queen and help the White Queen back to ruling Wonderland. To do this Alice must fight the Red Queen's Jabberwocky, a mythical creature. Getting to the Queen is not enough. It still remains to fight the monster. This is the fight any woman who wants to follow her soul must at some time undertake: an act of defiance and bravery to battle for what she believes in.

Alice needs a special sword to slay the Jabberwocky, which is bestowed upon her by the White Queen. Swords are a symbol of discernment, a precious thing. Without it, courage is vain and completely blind. A girl might instinctively reject a situation



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when she perceives it as harmful. However, a woman has to go beyond that: she needs to know *why* she doesn't like a situation, in order to make the proper decision. That's discernment at work: it distinguishes and separates. It turns strong but unclear feelings into crystal clear ideas and a vivid vision about life. In doing this, Alice will finally find her true identity and a philosophy to live by. So with the sword Alice fights the monster. The monster represents everything Alice hates: boundaries, the rules holding her back, and the destruction of creativity. "Off with your head!" Alice shouts at the final stroke, slicing through the Jabberwocky's neck.

The battle now won, Alice is finally free. To do what? Alice is now free to say "no" to conventional roles, and free to depart on her redirected life's journey. So Alice refuses to marry the man arranged for her. She will instead set out on a new adventure and start her own business. Creative, unique, sweet, brave and independent, the metamorphosis of Alice is now complete.

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