

Doris Lessing's Modern Alice in Wonderland: *The Good Terrorist* as Fantasy

Virginia Scott, Southwest Missouri State University

Early in Doris Lessing's novel *The Good Terrorist*, one of the characters refers to the protagonist, Alice Mellings, as "Alice the Wonder, the wondrous Alice";¹ and in Lewis Carroll's, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice says of herself, "There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I'll write one."² This only slightly guarded opening reference to Carroll's work leads the reader to examine Alice Mellings as an extension of the early fanciful character. Even the similar spellings of Lessing and Mellings (Double consonants in the middle, movement of "s" to end of name and "m" follows "l" in the alphabet) implies the possibility of an autobiographical tie, but that discussion requires further study before serious comment can be made. Lessing's portrayal in this novel of a grown up Alice with her group of political revolutionaries can be seen as a serious fantasy which has striking parallels to Lewis Carroll's Alice.

Just as she is in Carroll's *Wonderland*, Alice is the center of Lessing's novel. In the opening pages of each work, Alice makes her way into a house which presents many obstacles. Carroll's narrator describes Alice's predicament of not being able to fit through the small passage into the beautiful garden and comments that "so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible," (AA 30). Similarly, the "grown up" Alice has become accustomed to working out the impossible; thus, upon entering the house (or "squat") occupied by the small terrorist group, she enters the many doors and evaluates the damage rendering the house uninhabitable. Then she merely explains to the others that she has tackled this kind of problem before, lists the tasks (including repair of plumbing and wiring as well as trash removal from the attic and once beautiful garden), and tells the others that she will work with the Council to have the house taken off the demolition list. This task seems impossible to both the reader and the members of the group, but Alice simply says, "We've got four days . . . I'm going to get moving" (GT 7-14).

Not only do the two Alices assume they can overcome any obstacle, they often are reduced to tears by the immensity of the problems they feel they must confront. In chapter one, Carroll's Alice struggles to control her size, becomes small, and in the process leaves the golden key, which will admit her to the garden, on the glass table top. "She could see it quite plainly through the glass, and she tried her best to climb up one of the legs of the table, but it was

¹ Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 81. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will appear in the text after *GT*.

² Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, intro. and notes by Martin Gardner (New York: New American Library, 1960) 59.

too slippery; and when she had tired herself out with trying, the poor little thing sat down and cried" (AA 32). Similarly, Lessing's Alice (after proclaiming she was "going to get moving") called her mother for assistance, her connection, her "golden key" to the establishment which would make it possible to work with the Council. "She stood listening to the steady buzz-buzz, imagining the kitchen where it was ringing, the great warm kitchen, the tall windows, sparkling . . . and the long table where, she was sure, her mother was sitting now, listening to the telephone ring" (GT 16). This description of the comfortable kitchen, complete with clean glass windows and a table so clear in Alice's imagination, corresponds to the young Alice's vision of the golden key which she can see through the glass tabletop. But the adult Alice is unable to secure her mother's support and, as a result, begins "weeping out loud, blubbering" (GT 17).

The two Alices also share a similar attitude toward books and the perils of reading. Lewis Carroll's chapter "Down the Rabbit-Hole" explains: "what is the use of a book . . . without pictures or conversations?" (AA 25). When Alice discusses her schooling with Mock Turtle and Gryphon, her learning is always considered lacking. When she tries to use it, she gets lost in the conversation (AA 119-142). This seems a natural precursor to Lessing's Alice. The narrator explains: "As a child she had been teased: Alice has a block against books. . . . She had secretly read almost to the end of one novel . . . but felt as she had as a child; if she persevered . . . she might find herself lost" (GT 60-61).

Lewis Carroll's Alice is continually thrust into traumatic situations. In Chapter 6, "Pig and Pepper," Alice observes a wailing child being abused by the duchess, has the child/pig thrown into her arms for nursing, and finally is relieved to see the child "trot away" (AA 82-87). Similarly in *The Good Terrorist*, Monica who has been abused by the bureaucracy, appears at Alice's door, crying child in tow; and Alice, as a result, is "feeling that the young couples with their spotty, frustrated infants had been presented to her by Fate, as her responsibility." However, she soon convinces herself as she explains to the others that Monica and her "poor ugly thing" are "nothing" (GT 117, 182, 183, 184).

The ability to change appearance is also demonstrated by both Alices. In *Wonderland*, depending on what Alice ate, she grew very large or very small or occasionally "to her usual height." As she put it, "How puzzling all these changes are? I'm never sure what I'm going to be, from one minute to another!" (AA 77) Alice, the good terrorist, however, chooses her appearance and voice quite carefully in order to achieve her purposes. When meeting Bert for the first time, "she used her 'meeting voice,' for she had learned that was necessary if she was to hold her own" (GT 8). Later, when dealing with the Council, she carefully chose proper feminine clothes—"she needed a skirt sometimes for respectability" (GT 56). When manipulating the police, Alice was seen as "ordinary" and "unchallenging" (GT 70). There are times during the story when she wears "her look," an appearance which takes hold when her fury about a situation grows. At one point she and three others are sitting in the kitchen having a political discussion; "And now she did have her look. Her voice told her so; and the others, who turned to see how she sat swelling and suffering there" (GT 95). This description is quite reminiscent of the young Alice swelling up and filling the house, with arms and legs extending out the windows and chimney while the animals watched (AA 58-63).

Not only can similarities be found in behavior between the two characters named Alice, but even a suggestion of the connection to the young Alice by the adult Alice is in Lessing's text. At one point in the narrative, Alice is having an uncomfortable discussion with one of the women who shares the house. As their discussion moves into unresolved silence the narrator explains Alice's response: "Alice shut her eyes, retreated inside herself to a place she had discovered long years ago—she did not know when, but she had been a small child. Inside her she was safe, and the world could crash and roar and scream as much as it liked" (GT 121-22). This is similar to the discovery Alice made in chapter one of *Through the Looking Glass* that she could pass through the mirror. "In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room . . . 'Oh, what fun it'll be when they see me through the glass in here, and can't get at me!'" (AA 184-5)

These similarities are only a few of many which could have been cited. But why base a modern fantasy on a classic of children's literature? Judith Saltman explains that "good fantasies have in common an originality of concept, matched to their inner logic."³ The inner logic of Alice Mellings and her band of revolutionaries is consistent and relatively convincing. By the end of the novel, most readers are sure Alice is at least neurotic in her world view though she is quite convinced of its validity. But when evaluated according to the logic employed by Carroll in his Alice fantasy, a new perspective of a certain kind of terrorist mind has been presented. Alice of wonderland falls down a long hole, eats strange food, and is threatened with beheading, but she never suffers any injury. Though wonderland is frightening, it is not dangerous. With this definition of reality, it is easier to understand Lessing's characters. As long as they face only intimidation from the police and never suffer any consequences from their actions or beliefs, there is no motivation to alter their perception of reality. As Bruce Bawer explains in his analysis of Lessing's character development, "the aim of all this is to probe the 'impenetrable mystery' of the revolutionary sensibility—and, more broadly, to examine the human capacity for illogic, moral slovenliness, and destructiveness."⁴

When asked to comment on *The Good Terrorist* directly, Lessing clarifies her intent when creating Alice and her companions: "It's a novel about a certain kind of political person, a kind of self-styled revolutionary that can only be produced by affluent societies." She went on to say that Alice Mellings is to be seen as a "quietly comic" woman who is both "very caring and into sheltering people, but at the same time she's quite prepared to blow the whole city up."⁵

This dichotomy can be seen in both Alices. Young Alice accidentally upsets things, as in Chapter 12, "Alice's Evidence," when she tipped over the jury box, throwing all the jury men on their heads. She also displayed her concern by comparing the jury box to an overturned fish bowl and that the fish would die if she did not get all of them back into the water immediately (AA 153-54).

³ Judith Saltman, "Thresholds and Frontiers: Fantasy and Science Fiction," in *The Riverside Anthology of Children's Literature*, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985) 808.

⁴ Bruce Bawer, "Doris Lessing on the Road to *The Good Terrorist*" *The New Criterion* Sep. 1985: 16.

⁵ Caryn James, "Time Out for Realism," rev. of *The Good Terrorist*, by Doris Lessing, *The New York Times Book Review* 22 Sep. 1985: 3.

Lessing's Alice upsets things in the extreme when she participates in overt destructive activity: vandalizing both her divorced parents' homes, manipulating government agencies to support the terrorist band, and participating in the bombing of a downtown hotel. But like Carroll's Alice, who fears for her victims, Lessing's Alice places a warning phone call: "Oh quick, quick, there's a bomb, it's going to go off, it's going to be in a car" (GT 358).

The quietly comic character that Lessing would like for her readers to see is not humorous as in light comedy, but rather is, as Robert Scholes explains, "the kind of character who begins out of harmony with his world and is gradually educated or initiated into a harmonious situation in it."⁶ Similar to the chess game in *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice the good terrorist functions as a pawn, providing food, serving as liaison with the local government, and losing friends (other pieces in the game) while the control of the game of terrorism is coming from some unspecified source. The other residents of the squat make frequent visits next door to confer with the man living there even though Alice and the others do not understand the source of his authority, but the implication is that he controls events.

After the bombing of the hotel, all the members of the group scatter, and Alice finds herself alone in the house. A new man has appeared on the scene as the controller of events. He has made connection with only one member, Alice. As miraculously as young Alice made it across the board, Lessing's Alice has been declared queen of the house, the only survivor of the game, to continue as the nurturing guardian, the provider of shelter and food for the terrorist sanctuary. Her world may seem out of focus to the reader, but she sees it as a viable structure for her life. She has fulfilled the traditional pattern of the comic character by moving into harmony with the terrorist organization.

But when the reader remembers that everything is backwards in *Through the Looking Glass*, Lessing's comment regarding houses may be important: "For me all houses will always be wrong."⁷ Alice in *The Good Terrorist* sees her house as good, the actions generated from the house as positive. Yet this is the center from which thefts and bombings are executed. Bawer assumes that "the reader is supposed to be anguished, enlightened" when the bomb goes off,⁸ but Lessing's intention, based on her comments regarding houses and the invention of these characters, is that this behavior be seen as destructive, its motivation askew. This is strengthened by building on the inverted logic of *Through the Looking Glass*: what Alice perceives as good is wrong.

In the closing paragraph of the novel, Lessing presents Alice while she is having tea: "[Alice is] smiling gently . . . looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had perhaps a bad dream" (GT 375). Lessing has presented the fanciful trip to *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as a bad dream, a modern nightmare. The Alice of *Wonderland* is now an adult, but the behaviors of childhood have been continued and even intensified. She still cries when frustrated, confronts traumatic and monumental tasks, isolates herself

⁶ Robert Scholes, "The Elements of Fiction," in *Elements of Literature*, eds. Robert Scholes et al, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1986) 118.

⁷ Mona Knapp, *Doris Lessing* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984) 7.

⁸ Bawer 17.

from too much learning, and, as a result, creates a world in which she functions like the queen in the chess game. Lessing's fictional terrorist minds manipulate the events of the modern world according to their sense of logic in order to believe they are improving society. Lessing's novel uses the illusions of fantasy to explain the development of a frightening new reality.