

## **Mythologemes of Death, the Garden, and Time in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the mythopoetic elements in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, highlighting the enduring significance of interpreting its mythological dimensions. The study focuses on the concept of 'mythopoetics,' emphasizing its relevance in the analysis of fairy-tale texts across cultures. Using the mythopoetic method, this research identifies and examines the key mythologemes—death, the garden, and time—that shape the poetics of *Alice in Wonderland*. The article also delves into the symbolic role of various mythological animals, including the Rabbit, March Hare, Griffin, and Turtle, within the narrative. The findings suggest that Carroll's work represents a complex symbiosis of mythological elements, offering a rich tapestry of themes and motifs that resonate with both children and adult readers. This study underscores the necessity of further exploring the mythopoetic dimensions of Carroll's tale, particularly through the lens of linguosemiotics.

**Key words:** fairy tale, myth, mythopoetic method, mythologem, image.

## **Introduction**

The roots of English literary fairy tales in Celtic mythology underscore the enduring significance of interpreting the works of famous English writer, mathematician, and philosopher Lewis Carroll, particularly in the context of their mythopoetic elements.

Myth has long been a central focus of scholars in the fields of history, culture, and literature, serving as an inexhaustible source of literary plots and imagery. Studying the uniqueness of mythopoetics—the poetic reproduction and reinterpretation of myth in literature—is essential, as it involves examining how mythological concepts such as myth, mythology, and their derivatives are artistically embodied and transformed within literary works. This task is particularly challenging due to the inherent complexity and heterogeneity of myth's content and aesthetic functions. In modern literature, myth transcends its traditional role as tales of gods and heroes, instead engaging with the spiritual state of an era, culture, and humanity to address timeless ontological questions. While myth in literary studies is often understood in a 'secondary' sense, involving the reception and reinterpretation of archaic myths, it inevitably undergoes transformations that embody the author's ideas. Despite varying approaches to understanding myth, scholars agree that myth, as a universal mode of thought inherent in archaic cultures, remains ever-present in art. Mythopoetics, therefore, activates the mythological content embedded in literary works through a system of archetypes, symbols, and structures, reimagined by the author to express a complex and interconnected worldview. Ultimately, mythopoetics provides a framework for understanding how literature continually reinterprets and reimagines myth, creating new meanings and artistic expressions.

## **Literature Analysis**

Mythopoetics, both as a research subject and an analytical method, emerged as a significant field in the latter half of the 20th century, developed by various scholars across multiple scientific disciplines. The study of mythopoetics has expanded through several key areas: reconstructing archaic myths using semiotics, integrating the structure and semantics of myth into literary texts, and analyzing the role of myth within broader cultural systems. Scholars view mythopoetics as a dynamic system where myth 'flows' into literature through a process that includes imitation, transformation, and the creation of new, authorial myths. By examining the function of myth in literature diachronically—tracing its evolution over time—and

synchronically—analyzing its role within a specific cultural moment—researchers can better understand the persistence and transformation of myth in art.

The mythopoetic method, as described by N.A. Osipova, involves identifying the archetypal motifs, images, and ideas in a work, aiming to uncover the underlying myth-ritual subtext. A.V. Mironov further expands this by focusing on the symbolic and archetypal elements within literary texts. The method excels at revealing the deep-seated mythological structures that inform character motivations, intertextual connections, and cultural significance. By interpreting a text's mythological motifs, scholars can uncover its implicit symbolic meanings and complexities. Since myth itself cannot be directly studied but is instead understood through its literary manifestations, the goal of mythopoetic analysis is to identify and interpret these manifestations, revealing how they contribute to the overall meaning and significance of the work. As researchers note, authors often signal their connection to myth through the use of mythological names, motifs, or images, embedding them into their narratives to provide a deeper, universal context.

Mythopoetics examines the role of mythological narratives within a work of art, analyzing how these narratives contribute to the overall structure and meaning of the text. Central to this analysis are concepts such as 'mythemes,' the smallest semantic units of mythological discourse, and 'mythologemes,' which are mythemes that have been incorporated into a literary work, thereby gaining specific mythological significance. These elements are essential to understanding the multifaceted structures of mythological works, which are deeply intertwined with the socio-historical context and the artist's aesthetic worldview.

The study of mythopoetics is particularly relevant in the analysis of fairy-tale texts, which often reflect the cultural values and collective memory of a specific ethnic group. According to E. Meletinsky, the transformation of myth into fairy tales involves processes of deritualization and desacralization, leading to the emergence of new plots and structural changes that reflect a shift from collective to individual destinies. Despite extensive research into Lewis Carroll's work, the mythopoetic elements of his fairy tales, especially *Alice in Wonderland*, remain underexplored. This study aims to address this gap by examining the mythological foundations of *Alice in Wonderland* and identifying the key mythopoetic themes, motifs, and images that shape its narrative. Through this analysis, the study seeks to reveal the deeper mythological structures that contribute to the timeless and universal appeal of Carroll's work.

## Research Methods

In alignment with the specific demands of mythopoetic analysis in modern literary criticism, a qualitative approach was selected for this study. The research was conducted in two main stages, each tailored to address the study's objective of uncovering the mythopoetic structures within Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

In the first stage, relevant sources were carefully selected to provide the necessary theoretical foundation. The data for this study were derived from monographs and peer-reviewed articles published in journals indexed by Scopus and Web of Science. This comprehensive review and synthesis of theoretical literature on mythopoetic analysis allowed us to establish a methodological framework and determine a systematic sequence for analyzing Carroll's work.

The second stage involved the direct application of mythopoetic analysis to *Alice in Wonderland*. For the purposes of this study, "mythopoetic" is defined as the creation of an "authorial myth" within the literary work. Our methodology for analyzing the text was carried out in two key steps:

**V. Identification of Mythological Plots and Motifs:** We first identified the mythological plots and motifs that Carroll utilized in *Alice in Wonderland* and analyzed how these elements were transformed from their original mythological contexts.

**VI. Analysis of Characters and Actions:** Next, we examined the characters and their actions within the narrative, considering their mythological origins and the mythological lens through which they are portrayed. This analysis enabled us to construct a system of mythologemes and mythological situations that reveals the deep mythopoetic structures underpinning the work.

By following this methodical approach, we were able to draw conclusions about the underlying mythopoetic content of *Alice in Wonderland*, shedding light on the intricate ways in which Carroll's text engages with mythological themes.

## Results and Discussion

The fairy tale texts *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) serve as the primary materials for our analysis. Although these texts are recognized as classic

works, they are also considered mysterious phenomena in the history of literature, known for their rich layers of meaning and frequent allusions to mythological themes.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, the narrative operates according to the logic of a fairy tale, where objects, characters, space, and even time acquire unusual and fantastical properties. For instance, Alice encounters anthropomorphic animals and fairy tale characters who behave in distinctly human ways—wearing clothes, attending school, and engaging in conversations. These fantastical elements align with the mythopoetic tradition, where mythological motifs are subtly woven into the fabric of the story.

The mythological underpinnings of Carroll's world are evident from the very beginning. The plot, centered on a curious girl named Alice who follows a White Rabbit into a mysterious realm, mirrors the mythological motif of a journey into the unknown. The rabbit hole, as the entry point into this strange world, symbolizes a passage from one reality to another—a concept deeply rooted in mythological narratives.

One of the most prominent mythological motifs in the story is that of death, which is symbolized in various ways throughout the text. For example, the White Rabbit's fan nearly causes Alice to disappear, symbolizing the threat of death. Additionally, the Caterpillar's transformation into a chrysalis represents the cyclical nature of life and death, highlighting the theme of metamorphosis as a metaphor for death and rebirth. The Queen of Hearts, who frequently orders executions, can be interpreted as a goddess of death, echoing the mythological connection between sleep and death—concepts personified by the Greek gods Thanatos and Hypnos.

Moreover, the journey through the rabbit hole can be seen as a descent into the underworld, a common theme in mythology where the protagonist ventures into a realm beyond the living and returns transformed. This interpretation is supported by the conclusion of the tale, where Alice awakens on the riverbank, suggesting that her journey through Wonderland was akin to a journey through the realm of death.

Thus, the darkness of the rabbit hole, the confined space Alice encounters when she grows too large, and the motif of sleep all serve as markers of the underworld or the world of death within the fairy tale. These elements contribute to the deeper mythopoetic structure of *Alice in Wonderland*, revealing how Carroll's text engages with timeless mythological themes.

The plot of *Alice in Wonderland* is intricately connected with Alice's search for the door to the garden, which she glimpses through a keyhole in the White Rabbit's house after her descent into the dungeon. The garden, as a mythologem, carries profound symbolic weight in literary tradition. As noted by J. Tresidder in his dictionary of symbols, the garden often represents an ideal world, a place of cosmic order and harmony, epitomized by the lost and regained Garden of

Eden [28]. In many cultures, gardens are seen as a divine blessing, and this symbolism is subtly woven into Carroll's narrative. The contrast between the "beautiful garden" and the dark room in the rabbit hole suggests a dichotomy between paradise and the underworld, invoking the reader's sense of the "other world" and the human desire for transcendence.

Time, another critical mythologem in Carroll's work, plays a central role in shaping the narrative. Time is traditionally seen as a measure of movement, change, and the sequence of events—a concept deeply embedded in mythological thinking [15]. In *Alice in Wonderland*, the White Rabbit's watch serves as a plot catalyst, driving Alice into Wonderland and into a series of bizarre, seemingly timeless encounters. The Hatter's peculiar relationship with Time, who he personifies and claims to have offended, further emphasizes the abstract nature of time in the story. Here, Time is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative, reflecting the unpredictable and fluid nature of the Wonderland universe.

In addition to these mythologemes, Carroll's use of mythological animals enriches the symbolic landscape of the tale. The Griffin, as described by Tresidder, is a hybrid creature symbolizing power and authority, a motif that Carroll subverts by portraying the Griffin as a disgruntled, independent character critical of the Queen's tyranny. The False Turtle, representing patience and endurance, echoes ancient symbols of cosmic order, particularly in Chinese mythology. The White Rabbit, associated with the lunar cycle and feminine fertility in Celtic myths, embodies anxiety and urgency, traits that drive his actions throughout the story. The Mad March Hare, drawn from folk observations of hares during mating season, reflects the wild, untamed energy of Wonderland itself.

Through these mythological symbols—gardens, time, and animals—Carroll constructs a narrative rich in allusions and deeper meanings. Each symbol serves not only to advance the plot but also to invite readers into a complex, layered interpretation of the story, where myth and reality intertwine in unexpected ways.

## Discussion

The mythopoetic analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* reveals the intricate interplay between traditional mythological elements and the whimsical narrative structure that has captivated readers for generations. This discussion delves into the broader implications of these findings, considering how the identified mythologemes—death, the garden, and time—contribute to the enduring appeal and complexity of Carroll's work.

## **Mythologemes as Narrative Drivers**

The mythologemes of death, the garden, and time are not merely thematic motifs but serve as fundamental narrative drivers that shape Alice's journey through Wonderland. The mythologeme of death, symbolized through the White Rabbit's fan and the Queen of Hearts' constant demand for executions, introduces a darker, existential undercurrent to the seemingly playful tale. This exploration of death aligns with mythological traditions where death is both an end and a transformation, reflecting the cyclical nature of life, as seen in the Caterpillar's metamorphosis.

The garden, traditionally a symbol of paradise and divine order, is reimaged in Carroll's narrative as an elusive, almost unattainable goal for Alice. This reflects the human yearning for a return to innocence or a lost utopia, a common theme in mythological tales where characters seek to regain a lost paradise. Carroll subverts this idea by contrasting the "beautiful garden" with the dark, confined spaces of Wonderland, suggesting that the journey to such an idealized space is fraught with challenges and ambiguity.

Time, personified and abstractly represented through the White Rabbit's watch and the Hatter's relationship with Time, plays a dual role. On one hand, it reflects the relentless march of time in the real world, and on the other, it disrupts the conventional understanding of time within the narrative, creating a surreal, dream-like quality that is central to the story's mythopoetic fabric.

## **Symbolic Role of Mythological Animals**

The symbolic role of mythological animals in *Alice in Wonderland* further enriches the narrative, embedding it within a broader mythological context. The White Rabbit, March Hare, Griffin, and Turtle are not just fantastical creatures but carry deep mythological significance. For instance, the White Rabbit's association with the lunar cycle and fertility myths adds layers of meaning to his constant state of anxiety and urgency. Similarly, the Griffin and Turtle draw on ancient symbols of power and endurance, which Carroll reinterprets to critique and satirize Victorian society.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of original myths in literature is marked by their creative rethinking and alignment with significant versions that have shaped world literature. This process of literary adaptation and transformation of mythological images and motifs is characterized by a complexity that reflects an intricate worldview. The mythopoetic method serves as a powerful analytical tool, enabling the identification and exploration of these mythological structures within literary works, thereby enriching the content with greater depth and expressiveness. By interpreting texts through a mythopoetic lens, we expand the boundaries of artistry, uncovering the intricate connections between mythology and literature across different stages of literary development.

Mythopoetics, when applied diachronically, allows us to trace the evolution of myths over time, identifying key mythemes and understanding their transformation in specific cultural and historical contexts. This approach, which combines both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, proves particularly effective in examining how myths are artistically modeled and generalized within literary texts. It is especially useful in exploring works where the author's conscious myth-making is closely intertwined with the spontaneous assimilation and reproduction of mythological paradigms.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll masterfully blends mythological elements into a cohesive narrative, creating a symbiosis of themes such as death, the garden, and time. These elements are skillfully depicted through various markers, contributing to a plot that captivates not only children but also adults. The mythopoetic analysis reveals how Carroll's integration of these motifs not only enriches the narrative but also invites deeper reflection on the underlying mythological structures.

Given the insights gained from this analysis, further study of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* from a linguosemiotic perspective would be a valuable endeavor. Such an approach could deepen our understanding of how linguistic and semiotic elements interact with mythological content, offering new dimensions of interpretation for this enduring literary work.

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