

Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898), author of *Alice in Wonderland*, was interested in psychical research and theosophy.

Life and Career

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (pen name Lewis Carroll) was born on 27 January 1832 in Daresbury, Cheshire, England.¹ He spent his early childhood in Daresbury. In 1843 his father, a clergyman, became rector of Croft in Yorkshire, where the teenage Charles did his first literary exercises for the Rectory Magazines. From 1844 to 1850 he attended school at Richmond (Yorkshire) and Rugby. He suffered from continuous illnesses and was often in conflict with the other students. After leaving Rugby his father became his private tutor.

In May 1850 he matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, where he excelled in mathematics and classics. In December 1854 received his BA degree, and a year later was appointed lecturer and tutor in mathematics, a post he held until 1881. To maintain his studentship for life, he decided not to marry (thus complying with the college regulations). In 1861 he took orders as deacon of the Church of England, but did not follow this profession, as parish life never appealed to him.

Carroll was acquainted with social and artistic celebrities of his time, including Alfred Tennyson, George Macdonald and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He photographed some of them and also a few children (photography was his hobby). In 1865-66 he published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and six years later the sequel, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. A later two-part saga, *Sylvie and Bruno* and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, was a comparative failure and today is read mainly by scholars. He also published poems—*The Hunting of the Snark* (1876) being the most popular—and nearly a dozen treatises on mathematical and logical themes.²

Carroll died of pneumonia on 14 January 1898.

Psychical Research

Carroll's interest in psychical research began in the 1860s and increased after his reading of several books during the 1880s, notably Johann Zöllner's *Transcendental Physics* and *Phantasms of the Living* compiled by researchers affiliated with the [Society for Psychical Research](#) (SPR),³ of which he was a member.⁴ He paid close attention to the SPR's reports concerning thought transference, ghosts, telepathy, and other subjects. He held that trickery could not suffice to account for phenomena reported in séances held by spirit mediums. However, he did not think it necessary to account for these in terms of actions by disembodied spirits.

In a letter to James Langton Clarke (4 December 1882) he discussed possible physical causes of 'thought-reading', doubting that the SPR's evidence for telepathy, that 'seems to have been most carefully taken', could be explained by William Carpenter's theory of 'unconscious guidance by pressure'.⁵

All seems to point to the existence of a natural force, allied to electricity and nerve-force, by which brain can act on brain. I think we are close on the day when this shall be classed among the known natural forces [and its laws established], and when the scientific sceptics ... will have to accept it as a proved fact in nature. ... 'Thought-reading' is a phenomenon on which any domestic circle can experiment for themselves, it needs no professional 'medium'...[6](#)

It has been pointed out that the *Alice* books contain references to thought transference, for instance the ability of the Caterpillar to answer questions that Alice thought but did not express out loud.[7](#)

On 6 September 1891, Carroll recorded how, during a religious service,

a curious thing happened, suggestive of 'telepathy'. Before giving out the 2nd hymn, the curate read out some notices ... I took my hymn-book, and said to myself (I have no idea *why*) 'it will be hymn 416' ... It was not one I recognized as having ever heard ... And it was really startling, the next minute, to hear the curate announce 'Hymn 416'![8](#)

Theosophy and Fairies

Sherry Ackerman has argued that there is a symbolism implicit in the *Alice* tales which suggest that Carroll 'used allegory as a delivery mechanism for higher spiritual teachings'.[9](#) That such teachings were specifically connected to theosophy and occultism seems probable. That was the view of Robert Scott, who in a letter to Carroll stated that the famous poem *Jabberwocky* might trace its roots to 'an esoteric ancient cosmology', in the sense that it could represent an elaboration of some archetypal theme.[10](#)

In his novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* Carroll alludes to a version of occultism which seems strictly related to the theosophical positions of Helena Blavatsky and AP Sinnett. In the preface he asserts that his story

is an attempt to show what might *possibly* happen, supposing that Fairies really existed and ... were sometimes visible to us, and we to them; and that they were sometimes able to assume human form: and supposing, also, that human beings might sometimes become conscious of what goes on in the Fairy-world —by actual transference of their immaterial essence, such as we meet with in *Esoteric Buddhism*.[11](#)

If this should happen, a human would be, in at least one of three psychical states (an 'ordinary' one, an 'eerie' one, and one of 'trance or apparent sleep') under 'varying degrees of consciousness'; he or she would coexist with the fairies all the time but seldom be aware of it. Similar conditions would affect the fairies when migrating to our world, except that they could assume a human form —while the humans in Fairyland can only be detected as 'immaterial essences'.

Carroll adds a chart with the passages in both volumes of *Sylvie and Bruno* where such 'abnormal states occur'.[12](#)

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Literature

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Websites

The Lewis Carroll Society: lewiscarroll society.org.uk.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). This section is based on Cohen (2015), ch. 1-3.
- [2](#). For a chronologically arranged bibliography, see the website lewiscarroll society.org.uk/short-list-of-works/.
- [3](#). From 1883 and at least until 1889, he is included as 'Dodgson, Rev. Charles Lutwidge, M. A.' in the members list of several numbers of the SPR *Proceedings*.
- [4](#). All the best ascertained titles can be located in Lovett (2005).
- [5](#). W.B. Carpenter (1813-1885), British physician, physiologist, and critic of psychical research.
- [6](#). Cohen (1979), 471-72.
- [7](#). Ackerman (2008), 76-77.
- [8](#). Cohen (2015), 368.
- [9](#). Ackerman (2008), 87. Tearle (2014), 27-28.
- [10](#). Ackerman (2008), 79-81.
- [11](#). Carroll (1893), xiii. The quoted book was compiled by Sinnett and published by the Theosophical Society in 1883.
- [12](#). Carroll (1893), xiv.