Abstract:

Even though Jane Eyre, from Charlotte Brontë’s novel of the same title, and Alice, from Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, are arguably two of the most well-known fictional female characters of Victorian Literature, critics have rarely discussed them within the same context. Different in content, style, and genre, it is perhaps easy to understand why: Jane Eyre is a gothic realist novel for adults, and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is a nonsensical and episodic fairy tale for children. However, my paper reveals that Brontë’s Victorian bildungsroman and Carroll’s Victorian children’s book share a crucial interest in madness, female creativity, and growing up. In both texts, madness is a misunderstood symptom of creative girlhood, not of female sexuality or patriarchal oppression as others have claimed.

Keywords:
Victorian; bildungsroman; children's literature; childhood; madness; Lewis Carroll; Charlotte Bronte; creativity; kunstlerroman; Victorian novel

Author Bio: Whitney Elaine Jones graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville with her Ph.D. in 2014. Her dissertation, “Innocent Artists: Creativity and Growing Up in Literatures of Maturation, 1850-1920” explores creative child protagonists in the bildungsroman, kunstlerroman, and children’s literature. She has previously published articles on contemporary young adult literature, such as Harry Potter, and has co-edited a collection of essays on Suzanne Collins’ The Hunger Games trilogy, to which she also contributed. Currently, Whitney is a lecturer at the University of Tennessee and is working on a monograph, entitled “Adolescent Artists,” that investigates intersections between creativity and adolescence in Victorian texts written before the invention of the adolescent stage.

Author email: wjones23@utk.edu

A girl of ten sees a light hovering across the room and thinks it is the ghost of her dead uncle before succumbing to illness and mental confusion. Another girl, seven years old, converses with animals and feels her body grow instantly small then large, weeping and yelling at those around her. In these scenes from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) and Lewis
Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the imaginative vision that allows the young Jane to see the supernatural and allows Alice to create chaotic fantasy lands seems not to enchant, but to disturb. The young girls’ imaginative visions seem to breed madness. While criticism of the Alice books has connected madness to the child’s chaotic play, criticism of *Jane Eyre* has focused instead on Jane’s adulthood and her burgeoning adult sexuality as the source of madness in the text. In considering Brontë’s and Carroll’s texts together, I cross the generic divide between children’s literature and the *bildungsroman* to show that, in *Jane Eyre* as well as in the Alice books, madness is a result of the childhood creativity often celebrated by nineteenth-century authors like Carroll. Recognizing that madness stems from childhood creativity, that its roots are not in puberty and adulthood but in the transient stage that comes before, allows readers and critics alike to consider madness in a new, more positive light. While *Jane Eyre* and the Alice books may present childhood creativity as undesirable “madness,” their creative protagonists also anticipate the early twentieth-century shift from narratives of social maturation to narratives of artistic fulfillment, in which childhood creativity is not disruptive of maturation, but a prelude to the protagonist’s adult art.

Because *Jane Eyre* and *Wonderland* participated in both social and artistic narratives, I identify them as transitional texts that I am calling novels of childhood creativity—or novels broad enough to encompass the Victorian *bildungsroman*, Victorian children’s literature, and the *künstlerroman*. Categorized as a female *bildungsroman* and Golden Age children’s literature respectively, *Jane Eyre* and *Wonderland* are vastly different in plot, tone, and audience. However, reading them as novels of childhood creativity reveals striking similarities between them. First, the disparate genres to which they belong are concerned, primarily, with what it means to grow up. Second, they both feature creative girl protagonists—one a painter and the other a self-professed future author—who confront frightening or frustrating images of madness. Belonging more to the *künstlerroman*, or artist’s novel, the figure of the future artist strains against the conventional patterns of maturation that structure the *bildungsroman* and children’s literature. Creative girls like Jane and Alice imagine narratives outside of the ones they inhabit that prioritize social maturation and growing up; however, their ability to form new narrative patterns turns out to be not only a characteristic of the artist, but of the insane as well, of those who can no longer understand which visions are real and which are not. Madness is thus a sign of generic as well as developmental instability—a sign of the transitional quality of the novel of childhood creativity.

Victorian doctors and educators recognized connections between madness and childhood storytelling. The notion that creativity impeded maturational progress is evident in Victorian advice manuals such as Harriet Martineau’s 1848 treatise, *Household Education*, which identifies the child’s creativity as a mental disease, particularly in the case of three children who “were in the habit of telling, not only wonderful dreams, but most wonderful things that they had seen in their walks… giants, castles, beautiful ladies riding in forests” (148-49). This storytelling “deeply distressed” the children’s parents, who worked diligently “to check the practice of narration,” seen as a distressing symptom of deceit (149). Paying close attention to medical and pedagogical texts like Martineau’s, recent critical studies of nineteenth-century child psychiatry reveal a deep Victorian distrust of childhood creativity. In *The Mind of the Child* (2010), Sally Shuttleworth explains that, for Victorian doctors and parents, “the very signs of … childish innocence, [the child’s] ‘engaging nonsense’… could actually be the markers of mental disease” (19-20). Interpreted as either deceit or disease, creativity seemed to threaten the child’s educational and social formation.
At first glance, *Jane Eyre* and the Alice books appear wholly dissimilar. *Jane Eyre* presents, through a chronologically linear and mostly realist narrative, the difficulties for Victorian women of achieving both social integration and personal fulfillment while growing up. *Wonderland*, on the other hand, appears less concerned with practical issues of female development. Written for children, it depicts a girl’s surreal and episodic dreams, which are made up of fairy tales, talking animals, and nonsense rhymes. Yet Brontë and Carroll both write texts concerned with social education, and both give their protagonists creative powers. While the expectations of their genres—that the protagonist will grow up—leave little room for creative digression from or revision to the maturational plot of the *bildungsroman* and children’s literature, Jane’s and Alice’s creativity threatens to transform these texts into *künstlerromanen*. Studying the mad creative child reveals that these novels are not confined to a single generic category, but are transitional texts—novels of childhood creativity—that simultaneously reflect Victorian processes of maturation (as I will show in the first two sections of this article) and twentieth-century narratives of aesthetic formation (which I will discuss in the final section of this article).

I. Alice’s Creative Child Mind

Perhaps no other author has prompted discussion of maturation and madness as has Lewis Carroll. His friendships with young children like Alice Liddell—the real-life inspiration for the fictional Alice—have sparked innumerable questions about his possible pedophilia. These accusations, true or not, intertwine issues of youth and mental abnormality. I wish, however, to set aside biographical implications of Carroll’s sexuality in order to view Alice not as a sexual fetish, but as a source of creativity and art. Carroll’s fairy tale is the fictionalized account of a girl’s dreaming mind. As such, it seems to celebrate the unlimited potential and wonder of childhood creativity. And yet, as many subsequent adaptations of *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* show, Wonderland often reads not as delightfully imaginative but as insanely unstable. The plethora of opportunities and possibilities offered through the creative child mind resembles a fractured self in which a single, stable, adult identity fails to develop and emerge.

The multiple possibilities of being available in Wonderland manifest as disorienting shifts in Alice’s size, which disrupt prevailing patterns of female maturation during the Victorian period. She shrinks and then she grows, shifts that I recognize as consequences of creative thought. The dueling social and artistic narratives are located in Alice’s body as she shifts between being too large, and just small enough, to fit into the domestic spaces associated with Victorian womanhood. While it is natural to assume that Alice’s growth represents the process of growing up and that her shrinking represents her desire to remain a child (or Carroll’s desire for Alice to remain an innocent), the associative relationships between “big” and “adult” and between “small” and “child” do not apply in Wonderland. Echoing Victorian authors like Frances Powers Cobbe, who noted in *The Duties of Women* (1894) that Victorian women were “kept in the swaddling clothes of childhood” all their lives, critics have pointed out that the ideology of separate spheres resulted in the infantilization of Victorian women, that the ideal of Victorian womanhood was childlike in nature, innocent and pure. Because of this arrested development, Alice’s desire to grow up is associated, paradoxically, with her ability to shrink, and her creativity corresponds to her expansive bodily growth. When she is small, she has access to domestic spaces like the kitchen and accomplishes her greatest desire—to enter into a beautiful garden behind a locked door. Alice’s largeness, on the other hand, alienates her from
domestic spaces and stems from her awareness of her own creativity. When she grows too large to fit into domestic spaces, she identifies as a creative child and future author.

The first time Alice grows too large, she imaginatively personifies her feet and tells a story in which she sends them Christmas presents through the mail each year. Similarly, in one of the most well-known scenes in the novel, Alice’s body expands uncontrollably until her limbs stick out of the windows and chimneys of the Rabbit’s house. As she grows, she exercises her creativity, determining that “[t]here ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one” (29) This is Alice’s strongest claim of authorship. While large, she boldly asserts her own creative power and artistic future. Her shifting size represents her creative ability to shift between social narratives in which she grows up and “fits into” the domestic spaces afforded her and artistic narratives in which she envisions herself as an artist whose creative self surpasses domestic boundaries.

Alice’s unstable body expresses the risks and rewards of flirting with a narrative of artistic growth; while her opportunities for identity formation expand with her body, they also throw her into a flurry of mental confusion. Alice’s creativity widens her opportunities for self-identification, but also prompts the Caterpillar’s echoing question “Who are you?” or rather, who will you become? (35). It is a question Alice, standing in front of a mushroom with the power to make her big or small, does not yet know how to answer. As a manifestation of the creative child’s mind, Wonderland offers Alice a multitude of different selves to explore through constant shift in bodily size. However, by fracturing a singular sense of self, creativity resembles madness. When Alice’s body and creativity swell simultaneously, she experiences fear, frustration, and mental confusion. She condemns her creative talk as “nonsense” (14) and as “foolish” (29), cries until a “large pool” of tears surrounds her oversized form (14), and argues with herself, “taking first one side and then the other” (29). Alice’s conversations with herself read as mental instability as well as creativity, and the Wonderland creatures’ violent reaction to her largeness additionally suggests the threatening nature of creative girlhood. They attack her, prompting her to retaliate by kicking and smashing windows until she returns to a more diminutive size. Even though she is a self-proclaimed future artist, her attempts to foster her creativity end distressingly.

It is not simply creativity, but particularly the child’s creativity that produces madness in Wonderland. John Tenniel’s original illustrations of Wonderland dramatize the relationship between childhood, creativity, and madness in Carroll’s text. While one of the most famous of Tenniel’s illustrations depicts Alice’s cramped largeness in the Rabbit’s room, a less well-known illustration of the same scene depicts Alice reaching out the window of the White Rabbit’s room, grasping toward him. Her hand is the same size as the rabbit and the animal’s eyes as the hand hovers over him are huge with fear. What is peculiar about this illustration is that it isolates Alice’s hand and the rabbit from the rest of Alice, a visual manifestation of her earlier fear about the isolation of her feet from the rest of her body. The hand is the central image of the illustration, drawing the viewer’s attention before any of the other pictorial elements. Most importantly, the hand is a child’s hand—pudgy with stubby fingers, short fingernails, and dimples. If Alice is more “mad” in this scene than in any other—she is arguing with herself and violently attacking the Wonderland creatures—then Tenniel has chosen to illustrate this madness as childlike. The threatening hand with the power to pen stories is explicitly a child’s hand.

The implication I draw from Tenniel’s illustration—that madness and childhood creativity are symbiotic—reverberates throughout Wonderland. As Alice’s conversation with the Cheshire Cat indicates, the environment created by Alice’s subconscious mind is inhabited and
created by the mad. When Alice decides that she “do[esn’t] want to go among mad people,” the Cat’s reply is discouraging: “Oh, you ca’n’t help that... we’re all mad here” (51). The Cat figures that Alice “must be” mad, “or [she] wouldn’t have come here” (51). Because Wonderland is Alice’s dream, her own creativity not only places her within this space of madness, but also brings it into existence.

Carroll’s text also connects madness to childhood by using the temporal insanity of Wonderland to delay the child’s movement into the future. The mad tea party tempts Alice to use her childhood creativity to fix herself in a single point in time and thus prolong her childhood. At the tea party, it is “always six o’clock” (58). To enliven their eternal stagnation the partygoers tell stories, but when they ask Alice to contribute, she refuses. Instead, she asks questions about the partiers’ inability to progress through time. The jumps in this scene from storytelling to discussions of timelessness suggest that as long as the mad guests of the tea party swap stories across the cluttered tabletop, they will remain storytelling children.

While the mad tea party clearly connects creativity with stagnation, it also signals a significant shift in the text; it is the moment in which Alice’s creativity gives way to the primary theme of children’s literature—growing up. When the partygoers ask Alice to contribute a story for their entertainment, she surprises readers with her answer: “‘I’m afraid I don’t know one,’ said Alice, rather alarmed at the proposal” (58). Not only is Alice’s statement a direct contradiction of her earlier claims of future authorship and of familiarity with fairy tales, but the notion that she would have a story to tell “alarms” her. Confronted with the inertia of timelessness and the madness of the tea party, Alice refuses to self-identify as an artist, rejecting her creativity and her artistic future. Her frustration with Wonderland’s creative manipulation of the real (and adult) world’s rules, order, and logic grows until she finally proclaims the inhabitants of Wonderland to be “nothing but a pack of cards” (98). As she grows to her correct size, she damns the frustrating creativity of Wonderland as “Stuff and nonsense!” and flings away the story of Wonderland itself (97).

The madness associated with creativity in Wonderland ultimately influences Alice to abandon her creative self and grow up. Even though Wonderland is one of the most famous examples of Golden Age children’s literature—known for its rejection of didactic messages and instructional tone—it is not entirely free from attempts to socialize and acculturate the child reader. Alice’s stabilized size signals her reentry into an accepted process of maturation that does not fluctuate, but that moves logically forward from small to big, from child to adult. Carroll may wish Alice to remain a “mad” creative girl, but he understands that she must grow up and that this process will result in the loss of her chaotic, storytelling child mind. Recognizing that, in Wonderland, childhood creativity disrupts maturation and even causes insanity reveals ways in which Carroll’s text does not operate how we might expect Golden Age children’s literature to operate. It does not, entirely, entertain. Instead, like earlier forms of children’s literature, it educates—warning the child reader of the dangers of creativity. Furthermore, despite its substantial differences from the bildungsroman and künstlerroman forms, it resembles them in significant ways. Like the bildungsroman, it insists that children must grow up, and like the künstlerroman, it features a child protagonist who is also a future artist. Just as Alice’s body fluctuates and transforms, so too does the creative child take on a plethora of identities and selves; likewise, the novel of childhood creativity straddles and encompasses many genres. In so doing, such a novel prolongs childhood, madly it seems, in order to encourage aesthetic development while also accessing more socially-centered narratives in order to save the child from creative madness.
II. Jane’s Disruptive Creativity

The novel of childhood creativity is not limited to a child audience or to works with child protagonists. Reading *Jane Eyre* as a novel of childhood creativity similar to *Wonderland* reveals that, in literature written for adults, the creative child remains a potent and disruptive figure, despite Brontë’s adult protagonist. While Alice remains biologically a child throughout the narratives of both *Wonderland* and its sequel, *Looking-Glass*, Jane Eyre transitions from childhood to adulthood early in the novel, off stage, between chapters nine and ten. However, even after Jane’s abrupt transformation from a child of ten to an adult of eighteen, her subsequent experiences suggest that age alone does not define adulthood and that childhood, particularly childhood creativity, can disrupt the individual’s social growth no matter the biological age.

Where the *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman* meet in *Jane Eyre* is where madness often erupts. Madness is not a new subject to critics of *Jane Eyre*. Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first mad wife, has prompted various discussions of madness as symptomatic of race, class, or of Brontë’s own anxieties as a female artist. While many have discussed Jane’s potential madness as a symptom of her reflective connection to Bertha, I want to explore Jane as a potentially mad character in her own right, crazed not by heredity, class, or race as is Bertha, but by her creativity, which starts in and prolongs her childhood into her biological adulthood. By reading formative moments of Jane’s maturational and creative development, I will show that the coming of age narrative that frames *Jane Eyre* defines the child’s creative attempts to blur the boundaries between the real and the unreal as mental instability.

One of the most formative moments of Jane’s early life is her experience in the red room, a trauma that emphasizes her creative powers as well as their connection to madness. Often read as a space of sexual awakening or of Jane’s awakening into a realization of her oppressed social position, I suggest that the red room is also a space of creative awakening. Jane does not create art in the traditional sense in the red room; she does not draw, sketch, or paint in this scene. Despite the lack of artistic production, her experiences in the red room anticipate the two forms of adult art she later produces: the storytelling powers that facilitate her role as narrator of *Jane Eyre* and the surreal paintings she shows Rochester.

Before the red room transforms Jane into an artist, she occupies a position within this space is as an art *object*, the subject of a story or painting, not its creator. She is the central, misbehaving figure of a cautionary tale and a “picture of passion” (9). In the presentation of Jane as a literary figure, we see that in the red room art merges with reality to reveal Jane’s artistic potential. She fully realizes this potential when she imaginatively fuses a light traveling across the room like “a herald of some coming vision” with ghost stories and convinces herself that her uncle’s ghost has risen from the dead (13-14). Her imagination kicks into overdrive as she blends fiction and reality, awakening into her creative powers. When Jane weaves together the light and the story of her uncle’s ghost, she demonstrates the narrative powers that help her tell the story of her own life, and by blending fantasy and reality together to create a new story, she prefigures the central feature of her adult paintings, which visually deconstruct boundaries between near
and far, fantasy and reality. The first painting Jane shows Rochester has no foreground or distance, no usual division of the canvas plane. The second painting shows the evening star as an ethereal woman, body and sky converging to encapsulate opposing forms. The third painting once more blends human form with natural elements, depicting “a colossal head” with “joined” hands that mirrors the iceberg in its “glassiness” (107). A “ring of white flame” joins human figure and icy scene with fire, breaking the barrier between oppositional elements (107). The lack of boundaries in these paintings characterizes Jane’s artistic talent; her creativity, born in the red room through hovering lights and ghost stories, allows her to blur boundaries, synthesize opposites, and blend the real with the unreal.

However, terror and mental instability are born alongside her creativity. Jane realizes that her conjuring of her uncle’s ghost would be “terrible if realized” (13). She feels “oppressed, suffocated,” and “desperate”; she ends her time in the red room in “frantic anguish and wild sobs” and falls into “unconsciousness” (14). Additionally, after her time in the red room, Jane suffers illness; she confesses to mental confusion—“agitation, uncertainty, and an all-predominating sense of terror confused my faculties” (15)—and she admits, during her recuperation to “fearful pangs of mental suffering” (16). When the young Jane awakens into art, she also awakens into terror and insanity, here portrayed as a fearful combination of confusion and “mental suffering.”

The red room scene associates creativity with mental instability, but more specifically characterizes creative madness as a problem particular to the child. Brontë’s depiction of the scene illuminates the difference between the child Jane’s fantastical interpretation of the ghostly light and the adult narrator Jane’s sober recognition of its practical origins. This is the difference between the adult artist and the creative child, whose less tenuous hold on reality, whose more fevered imagination, destroys the boundaries between fiction and reality. While the adult’s sober perspective can differentiate between real and unreal and thus can stem the madness that accompanies the artistic ability to blur lines, the child’s uncontrollable creativity marks her as mentally unstable. Jane’s artistic visions identify her as capable of enacting and fulfilling a künstlerroman narrative, but the price she pays for flirting with this narrative is her sanity. Ultimately, Brontë depicts childhood creativity as a volatile force, threatening not only to topple the narrative of social integration that frames Jane Eyre, but also to topple Jane’s physical and mental wellbeing.

Childhood creativity’s ability to disrupt social development reverberates throughout the novel in Jane’s movement across the fictional landscape, which are, I argue, the result of her artistic vision. For instance, at Lowood Academy Jane befriends two girls: Helen Burns and Mary Ann Wilson. While Helen represents confined and idealized womanhood, Mary Ann represents expansive, worldly creativity. She “ha[s] a turn for narrative” and tells Jane stories about “the world” that appeal to Jane’s imagination, but that counter a maturational agenda (66). The narrator Jane realizes, from her adult perspective, that while the two girls garner “much entertainment” from their time together, they do not receive “much improvement, from [their] mutual intercourse” (66). While the creative child’s narratives are entertaining, they disrupt improvement, education, and progress. However, Jane reenters the proper maturational plot upon returning to Lowood from her time in the woods with Mary Ann. She not only enters into the
domestic space of the all-girls school, but she enters Helen Burns sick room and lays down on the cot where Helen dies that very night, a forever young and idealized image of childish womanhood.

In the space between the chapter depicting Helen Burn’s death and the next, Jane ages eight years, developing from girl to woman. This maturational fast forward includes crucial markers of growth: the loss of Jane’s childhood friendships—Helen to death and Mary Ann to time—allows Jane to progress past homosocial childhood relationships and form an adult heterosexual romantic relationship. The eight-year maturation highlights a clear division between pre puberty and post puberty Jane. She is suddenly capable of sexual reproduction and motherhood. Even though she is sexually mature (experiencing romantic longing for Rochester), her maturation and her position in life are not yet solidified. Like the still learning and growing child, Jane’s identity and social position as governess are undefined, socially and economically marginal. Additionally, the adult Jane is surrounded by children—first at Lowood as an instructor, then at Thornfield as a governess, and finally as a teacher after she leaves Thornfield. Not only does Rochester infantilize her, calling her “my little wife” (among other diminutive endearments), but she is plagued by dreams of children (217). Resembling bouts of unconscious madness, her dreams emphasize her visionary creativity as well as her inability to disengage herself from children and childhood.

Just as Mary Ann’s stories of the world tempt Jane away from the domestic space of Lowood Academy, Jane’s creativity propels her outward, disrupting her journey to adulthood. Sudden, visionary inspiration leads her to leave her instructor position at Lowood Academy and “all sorts of fancies bright and dark” cause her to feel unsatisfied at Thornfield (95). Her art—the portraits she draws to compare herself to Blanch Ingram—convinces her that she is too “disconnected, poor, and plain” to be Rochester’s wife (137). When Jane finds professional, economic, or romantic potential and opportunity—the hallmarks of adulthood—her visions, which conjure fantasies of other lands and other lives, make her restless and tempt her to escape not only her confining situation, but the plot of social maturation itself.

Creative vision and childhood influence Jane’s most dramatic escape from the fulfillment of her maturation narrative—when she runs from Rochester after discovering the existence of Bertha Mason. Jane’s primary intellectual reason for fleeing Rochester may be moral, but the catalyst of her physical actions is creative and visionary. Agonized by her new knowledge of Rochester’s mad wife, she dreams of her childhood, of “lay[ing] in the red room at Gateshead” (272). This dream, which recreates the moment of her creative awakening, offers an inspired answer to her position at Thornfield: “flee temptation!” (272). Jane’s flight from Thornfield thus stems not only from her creative vision, but also from the very moment in her childhood when her creative ability to impose dream and vision on reality comes into being.

Significantly, the moment of Jane’s greatest escape from domestic adulthood also results in mental and physical illness characterized by the vulnerability of the infant or child. Jane flees Thornfield after discovering the existence of Bertha Mason. The road stretches out before her, and as she moves into that “solitary” distance away from her adult fate as wife and mother, Jane falls into a madness characterized by childhood:

I was weeping wildly as I walked along my solitary way; fast, fast I went, like one delirious. A weakness, beginning inwardly, extending to the limbs, seized me, and I fell; I lay on the ground some minutes, pressing my face to the wet turf. I had some fear, or hope, that here I should die; but I was soon up, crawling forward on
my hands and knees, and then again raised to my feet, as eager and as determined as ever to reach the road. (274)

Jane’s wild movements weaken her until she regresses into a weeping infantilized state. She crawls forward like a newly mobile child, “eager” and “determined” to achieve her goal. This infantilization stems directly from the “delirium” that weakens her body. Jane’s “delirious” state propels her backward towards helpless, irrational infancy. Just as madness interrupts a normative pattern of development, so too does childhood creativity, prolonged into adulthood, interrupt and threaten to destroy normative social maturation through madness.

These scenes of illness and madness that follow moments of artistic digression from the maturational plot suggest that Brontë recognized how inhospitable a genre the coming-of-age story could be for a fictional creative child. Even though Jane seems to consistently walk away from social integration, following her visions away from domestic spaces, she eventually conforms to the same identity Carroll and Alice’s sister imagine for Alice at the end of *Wonderland*: wife and mother. Perceived and presented as mad, Jane’s artistic identity disappears from the novel’s end and the narrative of aesthetic development gives way to the *bildungsroman*. As in *Wonderland*, the creative child’s visions almost, but not quite, transform the genre. Not a part of the Golden Age impetus to entertain children through literature, as is *Wonderland*, *Jane Eyre* is an even more forceful example of how the novel of childhood creativity encompasses both social and artistic narratives. When we recognize that madness in *Jane Eyre* arises from prolonged childhood creativity, we begin to see the novel outside of the boundaries of the Victorian *bildungsroman*. It belongs in a new class, along with *Wonderland*, for which the creative child is a defining and transformative figure. Because the creative child can be who and whatever she wants, so too can the narrative in which she exists.

III. Adult Artists

When we consider *Jane Eyre* and *Wonderland* as novels of childhood creativity, we are able to understand them not only as famous examples of the *bildungsroman* and children’s literature, but also as narratives of artistic development. Related, to deception, illness, and instability, childhood creativity seems not to create, but to destroy, particularly the process of maturation, and thus appears as madness. But Carroll and Brontë are not truly suggesting that creative girls can only escape madness by denying their creativity and growing up. In fact, the endings of both texts, which abandon childhood creativity for mature adulthood, also attempt to construct spaces in which maturation and creativity can coexist without giving way to madness. Both endings attempt to tame the visionary creativity of childhood in order to purge it of its madness and make it a viable artistic tool of adulthood, thus allowing the narrative of aesthetic development, while muted and tamed, to survive and to coincide with the narrative of social integration.

Through her ending, Brontë creates a space in which Jane can be both socialized adult and artist and can thus create without risking madness. In the secluded Ferndean, Jane happily lives a grown up life. Dreams of children no longer haunt her, and she is no longer the underappreciated governess beholden to the education of her wards. Instead, she is fully adult, acting as both wife and nurse to her injured husband. As she steps into these adult roles, her painting disappears from the novel, replaced by the narrative of her life that is the text of *Jane Eyre*. This transition from child to adult and from painter to writer reveals that Ferndean is not simply a domestic haven. Simultaneously domestic and secluded, Ferndean allows Jane to
conform by growing up, like the hero of the *bildungsroman*, and also to live apart from the social world, like the hero of the *künstlerroman*.

Through the geographically slippery setting of Ferndean, Brontë suggests the generic slipperiness of the *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman*. It is in this final setting that Jane trades in her visionary art for a realist narrative of domestic bliss. The heroine of an inherently conservative genre, Jane gives up her transgressive painting in order to write a memoir that follows the pattern of that genre. Her creative compromise combines art and social integration, but replaces Jane’s previous visionary art with her role as the narrator of her own *bildungsroman*. Instead of telling the tale she envisions when she first arrives at Thornfield, “a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence,” she tells a tale of her own social maturation, of her “actual existence” (93). Jane’s transformation from painter to narrator seems to signal the novel’s final shift away from the *künstlerroman* narrative of artistic development and back toward the *bildungsroman* narrative of social maturation. Jane has stopped running, has escaped all threats of madness connected to her childhood creativity, and has achieved the hallmarks of womanhood: marriage and motherhood.

Yet, just as Ferndean accommodates social success within a socially removed space, the ending of *Jane Eyre* accommodates artistic creation within a social narrative. Jane remains an artist, even though her art occurs in a different medium than before. Her paintings disappear, replaced with a written, spoken narrative. The tale of her own life, even though it is not the tale of wonder and imagination she narrates on the ramparts of Thornfield, and even though it is not the fantastical landscapes she paints from images in her mind’s eye, is still a work of creativity. Jane is domesticated, and so too is her art, but she has not stopped creating. Her new art is focused, like the *bildungsroman*, on social maturation, a transformation that allows Jane to retain her creativity without the threat of madness. Brontë represents the process of growing up, for the artist, as replacing the maddening visions of childhood creativity with the sober subjects of adult art. It is a matured, socialized art, but art all the same. Most importantly, it is art freed from madness.

This new space makes *Jane Eyre* a transitional text, a novel of childhood creativity that bridges the gap between the Victorian *bildungsroman* and the early twentieth-century *künstlerroman*. The creative child disappears from the text, and the creative adult emerges, though defined by her social roles instead of her artistic qualities. Even though the child disappears, her prolonged presence in the narrative has given it a fluidity that allows the novel’s outcome to balance, however precariously, between two subgenres of the novel that are simultaneously incredibly similar and incredibly different. The novel of childhood creativity thus anticipates works like Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Prelude” (1918) or J.M. Barrie’s children’s classic *Peter Pan* (1911), where the creative child does not have to disappear, does not have to grow up.

More often associated with *Peter Pan* than is *Jane Eyre*, Carroll’s *Wonderland* also reconciles art and social integration. Even though it does not go as far as *Peter Pan*—which allows its creative child to remain a child eternally—it does attempt to free childhood creativity from madness and so redeem it for adulthood. *Wonderland*’s frame story replaces the creative absurdity of Alice’s dream with her older sister’s tamed dream of the domestic. While the majority of *Wonderland* takes place within Alice’s dreaming mind, the first and final chapter takes place in the waking world, where Alice sits under a tree with her older sister. As Alice awakens, her first action suggests that, despite her frustrated rejection of Wonderland, she retains
her authorial ambitions: Alice tells her older sister the story of her dream. She has become, as she says she will in Wonderland, the vocal author of her own adventures. However, Carroll does not permit Alice to have the last word. The narrative transfers its focus to her older sister, a transition that emphasizes Alice’s maturational future as reflected in, and reflected on, by the older girl. The voice that ends Wonderland is not that of mad creative childhood, but that of sober maturity. Alice’s sister dispels Alice’s dream into nothing more than a reflection of the barnyard that surrounds them, and transforms the radically creative author Alice into a placid, idealized picture of maternal femininity.

But the ending of Carroll’s fairy tale does not simply suggest that adulthood erases all traces of childhood creativity; instead, Carroll purges madness from the creative process in order to make creativity part of adult identity. The mad creative child disappears so that, like in Jane Eyre, the female artist/protagonist can retain a subdued form of her creativity in her adulthood. The final paragraphs of Wonderland both acknowledge the attraction of the child’s creativity and recognize the importance of leaving it in childhood, creating a space in which Alice is allowed both to grow up—and so not go mad—and to create. Alice’s sister imaginatively fashions an adult, domesticated Alice who will remember her own “child-life” and will retain a “simple” heart despite her growing maturity (99). Alice’s adulthood will be much like her childhood, but will lack the angry frustration—the madness—evident throughout her adventures in Wonderland. Carroll seems to understand that to retain creativity is to retain, in some measure, a childhood trait. And yet the placid image of Alice as adult storyteller emphasizes that her adult creativity will not be the hectic, frustrating, and mad creativity so evident in her actual childhood.

Wonderland’s sequel reveals what this tamed, domesticated creativity looks like. The poem that opens Through the Looking-Glass—published six years after the publication of Wonderland—suggests that Alice’s sister’s dream does not come true. The fictional Alice remains a child, yet the poem mourns that the “summer glory” of childhood has “vanish’d” (103). In other words, even if the child Alice remains, the creative child Alice does not. Many have noted the changes in the Alice of Looking-Glass. She is more goal-oriented and she desires to obtain power and social position (to become a queen). This change of character signals Alice’s loss of creative selfhood. She no longer seeks to be the author of her own adventures, but follows the pre-ordained movements of the chessboard. Even though Alice’s sister predicts that Alice will be able to be both adult and child-like storyteller, the changed Alice of Looking-Glass suggests that when Alice flings away Wonderland as nothing but a pack of cards, she flings away, as well, her childhood creativity.

In Looking-Glass, Alice is no longer a future artist, a mad girl weaving her own world, she is a maturing girl touring the worlds of her past creative childhood. Alice’s tempered artistic identity allows her to observe the chaotic wilds of childhood creativity, but not participate in them. She can see, but she can no longer play. Even the novel’s final puzzle—who dreamed the dream of Looking-Glass land: the Red King or Alice?—questions Alice’s creative vision and authorial ability. Can the maturing child create mad scenes in the same way the creative girl can? Was it really the Red King who dreamed Alice instead of the other way around? The ambiguity in this question can seem disappointing. Carroll denies his readers’ expectations that Alice is still the dreaming and creative child, but he also refuses to identify the true dreamer. This final unanswered question allows Alice to remain both a growing child distanced from mad creative dreams and the dreaming child capable of mad creation. Carroll’s frustratingly unanswered questions allow both the narrative of social integration and the narrative of artistic development to coincide in a single text.
The complex and perhaps contradictory endings of both works suggest that they cannot be understood, completely, within the bounds of their assigned genres. These works cross the boundaries of children’s literature and the *bildungsroman* and hint at future manifestations of the forms. Products of their moment in time, the creative children Brontë and Carroll give birth to abide by the rules for children during that time period and avoid madness by growing up; Brontë and Carroll also abide by the rules of the genres they work within, adhering to narratives that support social maturation. However, they also flirt with the conventions of narratives still to come, like *Peter Pan*, in which creative children escape adulthood altogether. Reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wonderland* as novels of childhood creativity shows that these two texts have transcended their historical moments to live on in our imaginations not just because they are the best examples of their individual genres, but because they defy those genres. They are amalgams of a variety of generic conventions held together by the pivotal creative child whose fluidity of identity grants the text itself a fluidity that allows it to transcend rules and boundaries. The madness that is so central to both texts is not, therefore, a sign of dangerous instability, but of the fluid potential of creativity and art.
Feminist criticism of the nineteen seventies explained that madness is, as Elaine Showalter explains, “the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated culture” (4). Showalter’s remark echoes earlier claims by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who revealed in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), that nineteenth-century female artists faced madness because of the innumerable and contradictory images of femininity they saw in the work of their artistic foremothers. While these discussions identified madness as a symptom of the woman’s repressed sexuality and creativity within a patriarchal society, more recent scholarship on madness and creativity argues that these readings are limited in their understanding. The contributors to the interdisciplinary collection of essays Madness and Creativity in Literature and Culture, edited by Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, approach madness not just as an affliction, but as a process of exploration and discovery. This new scholarship reevaluates madness as paradoxically destructive and creative.

2See Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977) for discussions of madness in Jane Eyre as a punishment for “the crime of growing up” (114). Nina Auerbach’s readings of Alice have similarly illuminated how Alice, like Jane, is punished for growing up and into sexual adulthood. However, critics of the Alice books have also associated madness with childhood, recognizing, as U.C. Knoepflmacher does in Ventures into Childland (1998), that Carroll “equates madness with play” (175).

3James Suchan and Marah Gubar, have read Alice’s creativity in a similarly celebratory fashion, recognizing it as a form of ordering and storytelling. My article complicates these views by exploring the relationship between childhood creativity and madness.

4Franco Moretti and George Levine identify significant changes in the form and content of the bildungsroman at the end of the nineteenth century, suggesting that by this point in time the genre has “failed” because the protagonists fail, or refuse, to grow up. See Roberta Seret’s Voyage into Creativity (1992), Gregory Castle’s Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman (2006), Douglas Mao’s Fateful Beauty (2008), and Jed Esty’s Unseasonable Youth (2012) for further discussion of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transformations of the genre.

5Seret articulates the difference between the maturational outcomes of the bildungsroman and the künstlerroman: “The Bildungsroman hero journeys from inwardness to social activity, while the artist moves from subjectivity to artistic productivity” (6). In other words, in the künstlerroman, the narrative of creativity replaces the narrative of social integration.

6James R. Kincaid’s Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture (1992) remains an influential and nuanced discussion of cultural constructions of childhood, innocence, and pedophilia, particularly in regards to the Alice books. Karoline Leach’s biography of Carroll, In
the Shadow of the Dream Child (2009), is a persuasive account of his interactions with not only Alice Liddell but also his other “child friends” that resists labeling Carroll’s attraction to children as sexual.

7 Others have attributed Alice’s size shifts to Victorian anxieties about female bodies and sexual maturation or to Carroll’s own fears about consumption. See Jackie Wullschläger, William Empson, and Lisa Coar for alternate readings of Alice’s size shifts that focus on consumption (Wullschläger), control (Empson), and Carroll’s sexual proclivities and anxieties (Coar).

8 See also: Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl; Nina Auerbach, “Falling Alice, Fallen Women”; and Catherine Robson, Men in Wonderland.

9 In Artful Dodgers Marah Gubar argues that Wonderland would not exist without the creative input of the very real little girls who influenced the creation of Carroll’s fairy tale—the Liddell sisters.

10 While Peter Hunt emphasizes the entertainment value of Golden Age children’s literature, he also admits that it cannot escape the genre’s didactic origins. He notes that “the books of this period are for a recognizable childhood …and any didactic intent… is a poor second to entertainment” but concedes that didacticism, even in Golden Age children’s literature is, “perhaps, inescapable” (59).

11 See Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman in the Attic; Susan Fraiman, Unbecoming Women; and Sarah E. Maier, “Portraits of the Girl-Child” for further discussion of how Jane’s movements vacillate, reflecting her current position within society.

12 Italics mine.

13 Brontë certainly recognized in her own life that the creative visions of childhood could disrupt the process of growing up. In a short essay entitled “Farewell to Angria,” Brontë announces her intention to abandon the stories of imaginary lands and peoples she created with her sisters and brother as children. She declares that she “long[s] to quit for a while that burning clime where we have sojourned too long” (314). With her intense childhood visions “subdued in the clouds,” Brontë moves past the unstable passions of childhood creativity to the “cooler region” of adult art and maturity, just as her protagonist Jane rejects the heated climate of India for a cool, forest-shrouded home at Ferndean as wife and mother (314).
Works Cited


