

Hidden Alice behind *Sylvie and Bruno*

YAMAMURA Yoshio*

Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel the psychological change of Lewis Carroll during his writing of the novel, *Sylvie and Bruno* by focusing on the period between 1867, when its original short story was published, and 1887, when Carroll met Isa Bowman, another little girl who acted Alice on a stage in London. The initial version was a genuine fairy story based on the folklore handed down from generation to generation in Britain as long as its structure is concerned at least, but the voluminously-expanded version published in 1889 turned into a complicated tale entangling readers with parallel worlds: Victorian society, where Carroll had been struggling to depart from his mental loss of Alice Liddell, and other worlds, where imaginary people and creatures reside. Despite its negative evaluation compared with the Alice stories probably because of Carroll's complacently pedantic and preaching approach, *Sylvie and Bruno* should be more widely read as his final homage to Alice. Multiplying negatives, although it sounds vexatious, makes it positive.

Keywords: Metamorphosis, Solitude, Revenge, Fairy, Reversal

1. Metamorphosis

The only phenomenon, that gave me any uneasiness, was the rapid increase in the size of the little creature we were following, which became every moment more and more like a real lion.

Chapter VIII "A Ride on a Lion", *Sylvie and Bruno*

Although *Sylvie and Bruno* and its sequence, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, the last literary two-partner work of Lewis Carroll, were published in 1889 and 1893 separately, while he was reaching beyond his fifties, 1867 should be the year to be focused on first to unearth the sign of his mental shift, which sowed seeds to bear different fruit in his later years. 1867 was a memorable period when "Bruno's Revenge", the original brief story was printed for children in

Aunt Judy's Magazine at the request of Mrs. Margaret Gatty, the founder and editor of the periodical.

To understand the Carroll's self-effacing inner profession buried deep in his final and longer stories, it is natural to return to their origin. His extended and completed work was intended as one long tale, but unexpected time-consuming literal labor forced Carroll to divide it into two parts and the latter was published four years later.

Although *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, the last half, is generally recognized as the sequence with further advancement along the same story line, it contains quite different elements from its prequel influenced by his further psychological change during the four-year time lapse, and it seems much better to take them apart to examine Carroll's psychology in the framework of two time slots.

* 工学部英語系列非常勤講師 Part-Time Lecturer, Department of English Language, School of Engineer

Therefore, I have decided to work on the first part, entitled *Sylvie and Bruno* and its original point, “Bruno’s Revenge” in this paper.

Back in 1867 when he was 35 years old, Carroll made up his mind to write a fairy story just for younger readers who might have enjoyed his Alice stories. It appeared as “Bruno’s Revenge.”

In “Preface” posted for *Sylvie and Bruno*, Carroll explained that the chapters headed “Fairy-Sylvie” and “Bruno’s Revenge”, Chapters XIV and XV respectively, are a reprint, with a few alterations, of the little fairy-tale. The content of “Fairy-Sylvie”, however, was contained in “Bruno’s Revenge” as one short story in the first publication. This small division in the whole expansion was one of the few modifications.

Another change, although it also looks trifle, is outstanding when his attitude toward the storytelling was revealed. In “Bruno’s Revenge” Carroll did not hesitate at all to confess that the “I”, storyteller, am Lewis Carroll to an innocent question asked by Bruno. Carroll himself played a main role to play with the two small fairies: Sylvie, a cute girl and her younger brother, Bruno, a mischievous boy like Puck in *A Midnight Summer Dream*, one of the most fantastic Shakespeare plays.

It might have been suggested by Ms. Gatty, who believed his name in the story would make it more attractive to children who must have enjoyed his two Alice stories. Editor’s intuition for commercialism must have worked, but to me it sounds more like Carroll’s secret message to Alice Liddell, who had already gone out of his reach, that he had stepped into the fairyland by himself with his confidential mission.

Many readers, children, and adults alike, might have expected that “Bruno’s Revenge” would be the harbinger of a new story to be continued. Their expectation, however, was not

met until *Sylvie and Bruno* was completed a little more than two decades later, and then it surprised and disappointed readers in those days with its meaninglessly lengthened and structurally disorganized development wrapped in preach-and-lecture-like comments.

What Carroll altered outstandingly was not only its volume and storyline, but also his own attitude toward the story. Although in “Bruno’s Revenge”, as mentioned above, he introduced himself by saying, “My name is Lewis Carroll.” His identity, however, in *Sylvie and Bruno*, is completely hidden from the beginning to the end and furthermore even his physical body occasionally becomes invisible to other characters in several scenes. Readers never know who the storyteller is.

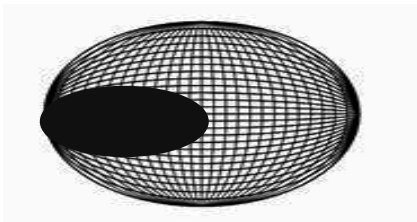
His intention was clear. The novel had to be published under the name of Lewis Carroll, which had already been established as an incredibly famous and popular literary pen name, but he tried to act as Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the lecturer of mathematics at Oxford, the real personality of Carroll, while he was working on his last work toward the end of his life, because Lewis Carroll might as well have been dead in his lonely mind of Dodgson since Alice Liddell had disappeared from his vision and contact.

That is why Lady Muriel Orme, the most meaningful figure in *Sylvie and Bruno*, and “I” talked about ghost stories during their train ride to Elveston in Chapter V, “A Beggar’s Palace”. The image of ghost symbolizes Lewis Carroll, who had mentally departed from this world. The train was a transporting device connecting the real world with Fairlyland.

Carroll tried to conceal his literary identity, and instead he provided readers with the blurred image of Dodgson with systematically and mathematically disordered comments and situations. Dodgson, not Carroll, acted as a story escort invisibly in *Sylvie and Bruno*.

The two stories, the original and its expanded version, share the same focal point on Sylvie and Bruno, the two small characters, but the circumferences of the tales are beyond a mere comparison as a simple geometrical difference shows below.

The former is a naïve fairytale in the simple two-dimensional eclipse shown in black, whereas the latter has an elongated orbit encompassing other worlds to create three-dimensional aspects.



A metaphor finishes this section from a biological point of view. If the first simple story is compared to a weak creeping larva on a leaf, 2-D plane, the expanded version is a matured full-winged butterfly which can fly in 3-D space. In other words, it is Carroll's metamorphosis through a twenty-year inactive cocoon.

This transformation also changed icons of Alice Liddell; from small Sylvie in "Bruno's Revenge" to the lady whose name is Lady Muriel Orme in *Sylvie and Bruno*. This literal mutation was incubated in the lonely mind of Carroll, which embraced the elongated circles.

2. Solitude

To be, or not to be—that is the question—
Hamlet, William Shakespeare

Hamlet, the most famous character created by Shakespeare, must have affected Carroll's mentality. According to his own diary, he saw *Hamlet* for the first time in 1864, just after his offering of another boat trip for Alice Liddell was rejected by her mother. Since then he had listened to the monologues of Hamlet on the theater in

London four times during the period when he was practically working on *Sylvie and Bruno*, between 1873 and 1888.

It seems that Carroll tried to be healed by one of the loneliest men in history. Carroll must have been disappointed and depressed in the social framework which worked against his honest and pure attitude since he found that Alice Liddell had grown up and been away from him by the time he completed *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, the second Alice story in 1972.

The plays of Shakespeare were entertainment not to be watched but to be heard in the Elizabethan era, and then more visual aspects must have been added to the stage costumes and sets in the Victorian era, but vocal sounds still played significant roles to convey messages to the audience.

While Carroll was watching and also listening to *Hamlet*, it is no wonder that Carroll's conscious mind, which had been focused on his drafting of *Sylvie and Bruno*, was influenced by his voices from the stage as that of the mathematician must have been intrigued.

The most convincing evidence is his interpretation of Hamlet's world-famous monologue: "To be, or not to be. That is the question." Many Shakespeare scholars suggest that the short expression should mean whether to die or not to die (to live) is the question, or some psychoanalytic and literary critics suggest that there should be other deeper comprehensions to include every mental conflict that Hamlet is forced to impose.

Let me quote such a comment from G. B. Harrison, a Shakespeare researcher: "Hamlet also soliloquizes; in general reflection, as in his broodings over suicide —To be, or not to be—but more often in passages which reveals also the movements of his mind, his perplexities and resolution". (p176. *Introducing Shakespeare*)

Considering the original approach of the

audience to enjoy the play in the 17th Century, the sounds were the key elements for Carroll to understand his monologue especially for the simple and echoing consonant, which is B in this case. To him, “To be, or not to be” will turn into a simple mathematical question if the speaker draws a straight line from A to B. If the line does not reach B, it is supposed to go to C like a triangle formation.

This geometry appears in *Sylvie and Bruno* as a silly question-and-answer session between Bruno and the Other Professor in Chapter XII, “A Musical Gardener”. “It’s like this, said the Other professor hastily drawing a long line upon the black board, and marking the letter *A*, *B* at the two ends, and *C* in the middle: let me explain it to you. If *AB* were to be divided into two parts at *C*.” and Bruno replied confidently. “It would be drowned.” (*C* represents “sea”)

It sounds like a childish approach, but I assume Carroll tried to act as a clown, the saddest profession in the world, to play on words. Hamlet himself repeated “word” three times when he was asked by Polonius what he reads.

Carroll had been struggling to conquer and survive solitude since the early death of his mother. One of his earliest poems, entitled “Solitude” is the most memorable poem in his writing career, not because it was reprinted several times on later occasions, but because it was the first work published with the signature of Lewis Carroll in the monthly magazine, *The Train*, in March, 1856.

This negative mental power as a literary author was the source of creation from the beginning. His pseudonym, systematically modified from “Charles Lutwidge” was born out of his manipulation on words.

It was during this time when he must have read Daniel Defoe’s *Robins Crusoe*, the story of another famous isolated figure, or Carroll might have done it in his boyhood due to its popularity as an adventure story. “Alexander Selkirk”, a marooned

but rescued sailor in 1709 and became the model of Robins Crusoe, was mentioned by Lady Muriel Orme, while she was discussing tame novels for the public with “I”, the invisible storyteller.

The attitude of Robins Crusoe, who was forced to live under the untamed condition by himself, was an ideal mentality for Carroll. The systematical approach of Crusoe to control given provisions on the isolated island also might have nurtured Carroll’s compathy.

Solitude throughout his mature life would not have been mutated to be fruitful if Carroll had not summoned Bruno and if the small creature had not executed his instructions “capitally” and “gravely.” Without Bruno’s revenge Carroll could not have compensated his depression.

3. Revenge

They would poison me.

Melmoth the Wanderer, Charles Maturin

One of the most notorious but easiest ways to conduct revenge is to administer poison without being noticed. It is a little astonishment that the original version has the harmful word in its title, although it was presented for naïve children in the Victorian Society, where they were expected to observe the rules.

“Bruno’s Revenge” describes a simple childish misconduct by a younger fairy brother, Bruno, to his elder sister, Sylvie, to give her a little tough time because she is always fastidious to him.

Since an act of revenge can be triggered through accumulated mental negative charges, it seems too profound for such a story. When it reaches psychological critical mass, it sometimes causes irrevocable explosion, resulting in physically violent actions. What Carroll did was to put Sylvie, the reproduction of Alice Liddell, at that moment, in danger in his vision.

Under fantastic and dreamlike depictions,

there is nothing harmful in the plot of the story, but a careful reading can find a small vice with the disguise of a beautiful flower. Carroll inserted “buttercup”, a poisonous flower, closer to Sylvie. Small readers might have missed his intention, but Sylvie would have been poisoned if she had touched its sap unintentionally.

Carroll must have the taxonomic knowledge from his childhood pastime in the nature of Daresbury. Arranging the warning yellow colored flower in the lovely setting is his careful and unnoticeable misbehavior.

Sylvie is a pretty green fairy and must be green legendarily because fairies were often witnessed green and purposefully because Carroll colored her as the symbol to express his mixed feelings: Love of nature that he had embraced since his childhood and envy that he had conceived toward the future life of real Alice.

He confirmed its connotation in Chapter II “L’Amie Inconnue” by writing: in a way that I felt sure would have made *Aeneas* green with envy. This chapter is also important because the mysterious face of Lady Muriel Orme, as the title indicates, who appeared for the first time in the story turned into that of Sylvie.

In addition, “violet”, sounding like violent, is described as her favorite flower, as is the case for with Ophelia, the tragic heroine in *Hamlet* and killed herself in beautiful flowers. Carroll tried to contrast animate Sylvie with inanimate Ophelia to overshadow the future of Alice Liddell in a very euphemistic way to console his depressed mind.

In the original story, “Bruno’s Revenge”, Carroll created his mental avatar of Alice Liddell, who had turned into emotional quicksilver, becoming a different person through whimsical and fragile feminine growth.

His small revengeful tricks continued into *Sylvie and Bruno*. In Chapter XXI, “Through the Ivory Door”, Sylvie ran into a dead hare,

apparently killed. Although the small animal is slightly different, biologically speaking, from a rabbit, the symbolic animal which escorted Alice into the dream-world, the similar figures between them often confuse children.

Carroll changed the rabbit into the hare intentionally in the story to soften the impact among readers including children, many of whom had already been familiar to the opening part of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Sylvie was terrified and shocked at the dead body, to which she asked a profound question whether God love the hare or not. The flowing quotation is part of their conversation between “I”, the storyteller and Sylvie.

“Does God love hares?”

“Yes!” I said. “I’m *sure* He does. He loves every living thing. Even sinful *men*. How much more the animals, that cannot sin!”

“I don’t know what ‘sin’ means,” said Sylvie. And I didn’t try to explain it

This episode does not go well along the running storyline, neither a reasonable adjunction, but it is a necessary deviation in which he solaces himself as one of the sinful men who should be loved by God. He understood Sylvie did not have to comprehend the meaning of “sin”, because it is a trap to convey farewell to small Alice Liddell whose short romance with Carroll started with the rabbit.

The final and adult image of Alice is presented as Lady Muriel Orme. In her name, Carroll placed another small but disgusting word, for ladies. “Worm” is hiding in her family name. It jumped out of the “civilized warfare among earthworms.” (p.11 *Life and Letter of Lewis Carroll*, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood)

4. Fairy

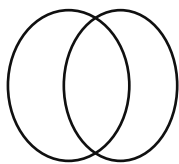
and so get a glimpse of the mysterious face—as to which the two questions, “is she pretty?” and

“is she plain”, still hung suspended, in my mind, in beautiful equipoise.

Chapter II “L’Amie Inconnue” *Sylvie and Bruno*

The above quotation takes me to Carroll’s first overseas travel in 1867, when Carroll and one of his close friends decided to go together to Russia. His interest in the Eastern and the Western Churches seems to have encouraged Carroll to leave England for the first time. The chronological coincidence with the period of the publication of “Bruno’s Revenge”, however, reveals that his real purpose of the trip was rather sentimental to retrieve his deformed and damaged heart.

That is why he left a very remarkable comment on July 22 section in “The Russian Journal”. When he visited a church in a very old town of the Dom-Kirche and there a religious sign captured his eyesight. It was a vesica piscis, a very ancient religious code.



This elliptic image is reflected in the quotation from Chapter II. The original meaning of the figure was “bladder of fish”, but gradually in the course of history it became feminine due to its well-balanced curved shape.

Since it is part of Euclidean geometry, making it possible to draw a triangle in its center, it is no wonder that Carroll used it as a span to cover the three points: Dodgson, imaginary people and fairies, and Isa Bowman, the substitute and reincarnation of Alice Liddell. The young actress does not appear in *Sylvie and Bruno*, but her name was incorporated invisibly.

In Fairyland names must mean something as Alice heard from Humpty in the looking-glass world, and based on this notion Carroll contrived

names of important characters.

It seems to me that the naughty fairy was named after Giordano Bruno, an Italian philosopher, mathematician, and cosmological theorist in the 16th century, who proposed cosmic pluralism, on which Carroll created other worlds. The reason why the distances from the real world to Fairyland was numerically mentioned such as ‘a thousand miles to Fairyland’ was that he showed his astronomical interest to distinguish the other worlds from mere dream-worlds.

A more important character is Lady Muriel Orme. Her first name could mean "sparkling, shining sea" from its Irish and Gaelic origin. It associates readers, if they recognize its association, with Carroll’s bright memory of the golden afternoon boat cruise with Alice in 1862. He tried to reflect the everlasting sunlight in the lady’s name.

Her family name, however, sounds negative from another perspective as well. Its spelling and pronunciation is slightly different, but Carroll must have modified Georg Simon Ohm in another perspective as well, a German physicist, who found, simply speaking, mathematical relationship among electric current, resistance and voltage. This relationship became known as Ohm’s law.

In other words, he showed resistance exists in electric current, which was regarded as magical power in the Victorian Society. It was 1841 that Ohm’s work was eventually recognized by the Royal Society. It must have been remarkable scientific news for Carroll.

Electric current was changed into a metaphor of river current, and also life. Carroll crammed his brilliant memory along the river and the new idea of invisible obstacle in natural phenomenon into the name of a young beautiful lady, who was the icon of Alice Liddell.

The river in Oxford was a special place where

Carroll spent golden time with Alice Liddell, and Bruno pronounced “revenge” as “river edge” insinuating Carroll cannot sail with her any longer but have to keep standing at the edge of the river.

The place where Muriel Orme lives is Elveston. Although it is described in a real setting, it also sounds fantastic. “Elves” is a plural form of “elf”, a small fairy. Elfland is one of the other places in the story. In this context, the town itself could be incorporated into the imaginary world.

The railway junction between London and Elveston is Fayfield, which consists of two words: fay and field, and the former word means fairy.

A different interpretation, if Elveston is shortened and altered into “eleven”, can lead us to the eleventh sign of the zodiac, Aquarius, to which Lewis Carroll belongs. The mission of this heavenly sign is to use water to help other people. That is why anonymous Carroll suggested that Bruno should water Sylvie’s garden as his “river-edge” in “Bruno’s Revenge” and the corresponding chapter of *Sylvie and Bruno*.

Considering his close encounter with the fish sign in Russia, here again he had his vector to the direction of water. Since his zodiac sign is aquarius, it was no wonder he tried to use its aquatic power when needed. Assosiations with water visible or invisibly appear in *Sylvie and Bruno*. Orme has a similar sound to that of “eau” in French, meaning water. Reader finds the title of Chapter II is in French, in which Lady Muriel appears for the first time as a nameless lady.

Against the image of running water this is where Carroll dared to challenge the authority of physics from a mechanical point of view. That was the same spirit that Bruno applied toward the catholic belief in the 15th Century.

5. Reversal

Time is only a kind of space.

The Time Machine, H.G. Wells

Before the advent of *The Time Machine* in 1895, it was just beyond imagination for Carroll to technologically return to the past even in a dream-world. The only option that he could adopt in real life was photography to preserve and memorize figures taken at that moment, but since what he found was the still images flattened in frozen time without any words and actions, he abandoned it in 1888 according to his diary. It was not a mere coincidence that his self-imposed inhibition synchronized with the marriage of Alice Liddell in the same year. The departure of Alice enforced him to discard the technology based on light, which does not allow its reversal motion.

It was also the busy period for Carroll when he was working on *Sylvie and Bruno*, and he contrived another device to realize better treatment of time. In the new story, he introduced a prototype of the time machine in “An Outlandish Watch”, Chapter XXIII.

With this magic watch which could rewind the flow of time, he provided the storyteller in the story with a confusing experience in a little villa, in which he decided to test the reverse action of the gadget, and there he had a chance to listen to conversations among father and his daughters during their meal in the dining-room. Actions and motions were presented chronologically backward.

The concept of advertent time movement that Carroll relied on was, in a sense, rather mathematical in terms of moving backward along a number line, from a larger number (now) to smaller number (past). The idea of time-warping was impossible in the Newtonian world view, which dominated the Victorian Society.

One simple vocal expression mentioned in this scene, however, was profound, overreaching spacetime continuum. “To be a bride!” was loudly spoken by one of the sisters to her father. Her manifestation was an unpardonable decision, which should not have advanced in time for the storyteller, possibly another variation of “to be or not to be.”

The reason why he introduced such a small machine into the fantasy-oriented fairy-tale was not only under the influence of the Industrial Revolution but also reviving memory of his golden summer days, which was triggered by his close encounter with Isa Bowman, another Alice on the stage. She was 12 years old when she met him for the first time in 1887, and her age, shape and chemistry must have extracted nostalgic sensation out of his sub-consciousness.

She was proud of making friends with the Creator of Alice and she wrote in her memoir of Alice: He used to look at me, in the very tenderest, gentlest way. Of course, on an ordinary occasion I knew that his interested glance did not mean anything of any extra importance. Carroll was just a famous author and great gentleman for her.

For Carroll, however, she must have been a reincarnation of Alice Liddell. His unconscious but embryotic affliction toward her existence was transformed into a memorable message in the form of a double acrostic at the beginning of *Sylvie and Bruno*. The spelling of Isa Bowman was meticulously woven in the poem and it was his secret manifestation that the poem was devoted to Alice Liddell under the disguise of another Alice.

Two-dimensional photography did not help him very much. Instead, he returned to the power of storytelling. Even though the story is printed on flat pages, it can invoke three dimensional images in imagination, and even silent reading of the story causes sound effects in

the mind of readers as on-stage performances do.

Carroll also reconfirmed that the more widely the story is read, the more extensively his message is spread, unlike exchanges of private letters.

The stories of Sylvie and Bruno are even more important than the Alice stories for the above-mentioned reasons. Alice does not appear at all in his final work, but it conveys hidden messages to Alice Liddell in her girlhood, who obediently escorted him to other worlds, which were believed to exist by Bruno, the Italian astronomer.

To conclude this paper, pardon me to compose a Carroll-like *sillygism* as follows:

Sylvie and Bruno is regarded as a novel.

All novels are newfangled.

Sylvie and Bruno should be new-fan-glued.

May more readers enjoy this novel and its sequence, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, on which I am planning to work in my next paper. A more astonishing finale will be waiting. Another important character named Arthur Forester is the key person.

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