When Alice meets a mouse in Wonderland, she determines that the best way to address it is ‘O Mouse’, using the vocative case that she has learned from looking in her brother’s Latin grammar: ‘A mouse -of a mouse - to a mouse - a mouse - O mouse!’ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the mouse does not acknowledge Alice. In Wonderland, Latin grammar books may not provide much of a useful guide for starting conversations. Yet *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is deeply classical, being a *katabasis*, a journey to, and return from, the underworld. (It comes, of course, from the Greek word for ‘down’; a *katabasis* then, is a journey down, frequently used to refer to journeys to the underworld; its opposite, *anabasis*, is a journey ‘up’, often used to refer to a journey inland—to the interior of a country, for example.)

In falling down the rabbit hole to an underground otherworld, Alice travels an archetypal path, following in the footsteps of other travelers in the classical underworld such as Aeneas, Odysseus, Orpheus, and Persephone. There is of course a difference: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is comic, satiric, and focuses on the adventures of a little girl, rather than a king, a princess, or an epic hero. Nevertheless, in negotiating the curious and dangerous logic of Wonderland, in resisting the challenges to her intellect, sanity, and ultimately her life, to return to the meadow where she is drowsing with her sister, Alice journeys successfully through a child’s version of Hades.

These two examples show some different ways that classical influences and classical reception can operate in a work of children’s literature. ‘O mouse’ is an example of the social and the overt role of classical reception and it operates in terms of gender, class, and education. Alice, a girl, looks into the Latin books belonging to her brother, a boy, curious about a site of male learning and learnedness. In class terms, it critiques, but also celebrates, the abstruseness of middle-class male learning. It makes a nod to the real Alice Liddell’s family - her lexicographer father, Henry Liddell, was co-author of ‘*A Greek-English Lexicon*’, still in use as a standard dictionary for students of Ancient Greek. Alice, as the youngest child in this family would be familiar with the discourse of learning, Latinity and Hellenism.

Latin then, as a site of male knowledge and education and profession, of cultural capital that the fictional Alice may be excluded from as a girl, fails to work on the Wonderland Mouse, and Alice has to use her own intelligence and logic to proceed further. Of course, Latin cases, literally translated into English, sound ridiculous, particularly ‘O Mouse’ in the vocative case—a joke that most students of Latin would recognize and have made some version of. All these nuances are there for readers to recognize, consciously or unconsciously, or to encounter for the first time. Latinity is overtly referred to, and rejected, but still present in the text: an overt example of classicism in a minute way.

In contrast to ‘O Mouse’, Alice’s *katabasis* is an example of the intertextual and the hidden version of classical influence. The book does not overtly refer to classical journeys, or make reference to Odysseus or Aeneas; it takes some work and knowledge to...
find classical parallels. But it is written in a structure that readers familiar with conventions of epic would recognize, and would therefore enjoy the parallels and variations on a classical theme.

Some would see the idea of a small girl's *katabasis* as a parody; others would see it as elevating childhood through epic; others still might see it as taking the experiences and worldview of childhood utterly seriously. I myself think it is all three simultaneously: Carroll taking seriously the Liddell girls' request for a story with a child as a hero, giving Alice heroic status, giving her intelligence and logic the dignity of a heroic journey, but also sending up epic conventions and parodying and satirizing life in Victorian Oxford.

In terms of the connection between classical reception and character, we find in these two examples Alice's character affected or represented - as intelligently curious - looking in her brother's Latin book, and applying its rules to an unfamiliar situation, but then rejecting its rules when they fail to work, and trying another approach. Alice also has the heroic status of an adventurer in a strange land - retaining her dignity and sanity in the nonsense world underground.

Underscoring that heroic representation of Alice, reinforcing that she is a logical and intelligent child, is a third classical precedent - namely, the series of Socratic dialogues she engages in with the animals of Wonderland, dialogues about the nature of the world and experience. Again, these are somewhat hidden aspects, but reflect Carroll's classical training, and of course the overlap with his academic career as a mathematician and logician.

These examples show some of the ways that classical ideas run through *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and to indicate the value of a classical reception studies approach. Classical reception studies has been gaining momentum in recent years. It intersects a number of disciplines including classics, literature, education, history, art history, and sociology, to consider the transmission and transformation of the culture, history, and ideas of classical antiquity - especially, but not exclusively, of ancient Greece and Rome. It overlaps with the study of the Classical Tradition, but instead of focusing on the transmission of particular classical texts, it is interested in the interaction between the classics and the texts, or people, receiving and transmitting them, and the multiple valences of meaning in receptions of classical material. It aims to understand the impact and applications of classical materials, and the ways in which they have been read or understood over the centuries, as well as what those ways of reading, interpreting, or transmission say about the period, text, or writer under consideration.


Reception studies of this nature can be profoundly or lightly classical, can find classical ideas to be strong organizing principles behind particular works, but also part of the fabric of cultural engagement in a particular period, or genre, or area. (These are all examples from nineteenth-century studies, but there are of course many others.)

So, to children's literature. In her article *Children's and Young Adults' Literature* in the Brill New Pauly, Bettina Kümmerling-Melbauer outlines four main ways the classical impulse can be seen in children's literature: first, and most obviously, the transmission, translation, and adaptation of specific texts and authors, such as Aesop's Fables. Next are recurring mythological figures, such as Hercules or Theseus, or Persephone, whose stories translate well into children's literature. Then there are particular historical events or figures, which appear either in educational formats, or as backgrounds to historical or didactic novels - for example, Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), made up of stories set in different periods of history, including some written about Britain from the perspective of Roman soldiers. Last in her list is the conflation of an idealized version of childhood with the ideas, both of the shepherd deity Pan, and the *puer aeternus*, or eternal youth (Kümmerling-Melbauer, 2012). As we shall see, this last idea is of particular interest when considering the representation of talented children in children's (and adult) literature from the late Victorian and Edwardian period. As well as these overt versions of classicism, where myths, or figures, or stories are explicitly referred to, are the narrative structures and patterns, such as Alice's *katabasis*, that run through children's literature. And there are the social aspects of classicism as well, in which references to classical figures, or words from classical languages, are part of a set of assumptions about shared knowledge, or educational practices, or class or cultural capital, that show the pervasiveness of classical knowledge as a shared point of reference - even for writers or readers whose actual classical education may be only minimal.

My interest in this topic, then, is the way that classical motifs contribute to the construction of character in children's literature, and also to the construction of the ideal child.

So, to some case studies, and to the way that classics and character affect one another. And it is with the school stories that I begin, looking at *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) by Thomas Hughes, *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858), and *St Winifred's or the World of School* (1863) by Hughes's contemporary, Frederic Farrar. In these novels from the 1850s and 60s, the learning of classical subjects is strongly connected to the character development of child protagonists, in terms of their morals, grit, and polish. In other words,
they do not merely need to acquire cultural capital or possessing abilities, but also to demonstrate honesty, diligence, and endurance. So, for example, in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, this is how George Arthur, the intellectual boy Tom befriends, does his composition prep:

He considered first what point in the character or event which was the subject could most neatly be brought out within the limits of a vulgus, trying always to get his idea in to the eight lines, but not binding himself to ten or even twelve lines if he couldn't do this. He then set to work, as much as possible without Gradus or other help, to clothe his idea in appropriate Latin or Greek, and would not be satisfied till he had polished it well up with the aptest and most poetic words and phrases he could find.9

The artistic and sensitive Arthur is unusual among Tom's cohort. In taking this approach to his Latin or Greek, he demonstrates an honesty that strongly contrasts to Tom and his friend Harry East, who have given into peer pressure, and are in the habit of cribbing and cheating. And while Tom is a good influence on Arthur in helping him fit into the rough and tumble of 'boy society', Arthur influences him and Harry to take the honest, and scholarly approach - an important step in their moral education; being good scholars of Latin, in the sense of doing their work properly. They will never become professional scholars of the subject like Arthur, but the novel doesn't require them to do that - it is part of the makeup of a gentleman to engage properly in all areas of his life; and being a good scholar is part of Tom's progress towards becoming an adult. In contrast to the anabaisi of Alice's journey, Tom makes an upward journey - an anabaisi of sorts.

In contrast to Tom, Eric Williams, the protagonist of *Eric, or Little by Little*, has a downward progress through disgrace and towards death. Though a good scholar who likes learning, Eric clashes with teachers, gives into peer pressure in a school rife with a culture of cheating and bullying, and despite his many refined characteristics, slips gradually from the path of proper learning down the path to disaster and death. Farrar continues this theme in *St Winifred's, or the World of School*. Here the power of good and bad teaching and learning of Latin to set boys (and teachers) up well, or to destroy them, is starkly apparent in the case of the protagonist, Walter, a brilliant student who nearly falls by the wayside, overburdened with unpalatable and impossible assignments. A sadder case still is Walter's friend Dubbs, an honest plodder, out of his depth in the classical classroom, and whose Latin studies contribute to a brain fever that kills him: Here is his deathbed scene, in which Dubbs feverishly tries to memorize lines from Horace's *Odes III*, 3 and 4:

"Hac arte Pollux et vagus Hercules, Enisus arces attigit igneas, Quo inter Augustus recumbens - Oh, what does come next?" and he stopped with an expression of pain on his face, pressing his hands tight over his brow.

"Don't go on with the repetition, Johnny, dear," said the poor mother. "I'm sure you know it enough now."

“Oh no! not yet, mother; I shall be turned, I know I shall to-morrow, and it makes him so angry; he'll call me idle and incorrigible, and all kinds of things." And then he began again -

"Sed quid Typhoeus aut validus Mimas, Aut quid minaci Porphyron statu, Quid Rhoetus - Rhoetus - quid Rhoetus - Oh, I shall break down there, I know I shall;" and he burst into tears. "It's no good trying to help me [. . .] I can't learn it."10

Farrar always chooses passages that have literary significance: the first passage is about a Herculean task of straining to reach the heavens; the second about the overthrow of the Titans by the Olympian gods. Both passages emphasize the strenuousness of Dubbs’ task and the pathos of his failure when he dies, as when his nurse attests his death to his mother to “that there heathenish Latin”.11

Farrar's novels are saturated with erudition, and employ a very wide range of quotation and allusion, in a way that renders them unsuitable for all but the keenest scholars among young readers. But as a teacher, like many other writers of school stories in this period, his pedagogical ideas drive his classroom scenes, and he is not alone in advocating less emphasis on rote-learning of grammatical points, and an approach geared to the interest and relevance of the subject. Hughes, for instance, admires the teachers who bring the subject to life, and the scholars for whom their subject is alive, and Farrar agrees. Part of what makes Eric's downfall tragic is that he is a natural scholar, a boy to whom literature speaks: his path through disgrace to death is therefore an indictment of a tragically flawed educational system.12

Though Hughes and Farrar show sympathy with boys forced to learn a subject they might be unsuited for, the learning of Latin in their novels is a moral as well as an intellectual exercise - good scholars tend to be good boys, and will become good men. In stressing the difficulty of Latin, and its value in providing a moral testing ground, they emphasize the rigour and strength required for the scholarly approach - defending intellectual rigour against the growing cult of games and muscularity. More generally, in employing classical language, motifs, and atmosphere of learning and learnedness, they suggest that the moral development of schoolboys should be seen as miniature epics.

This is quite a different use of classical motifs from those we see in *Alice*, given that Alice has no need to develop morally, or indeed, to mature at all. But we can see a shared emphasis on the underlying idea of epic and heroism that is of interest. This approach can be seen in later domestic fiction for girls, in novels such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) and Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1872). In these novels, which engage with the ‘problem’ of what to do with a passionately intelligent and creative girl whose abilities clash with available conventional socialized roles for women,
classical imagery and motifs appear in different ways. While Alice goes through a literal *katabasis* in her descent down the rabbit hole to Wonderland, these novels, using the language of psychological realism, engage in a metaphorical *katabasis* of the soul, by forcing creative girls, such as Jo March and Katy Carr to experience pain, disability and grief, experiences that forge and temper their characters. Jo and Katy’s creative abilities are initially diffuse and uncontrolled; they learn, through their passage through dark times, to channel their talents in appropriate directions that transform and celebrate the home. Jo does this through coping with the death of her sister, Beth; sharing her journey towards death; and grieving with her as she passes. And at the same time as she does this, she channels her grief and love into writing for her family rather than for herself (writing that brings financial rewards and critical praise as well as the love and delight of her family)⁷⁴. Katy does this through the years spent in the ‘School of Pain’, following a literal *katabasis*, when she falls from an unsafe swing and twists her spine: during the years of her adolescence, she is confined to bed and later a wheelchair; she learns to suppress her selfish desires, and to direct her creative energies to supporting her family and becoming the ‘heart of the house’⁷⁵.

The forging processes of these *katabasis* transform the creative girl into a tutelary deity of the household. She is not an angel of the house, the restrictive image of feminine servitude constructed by Coventry Patmore, but a more positive genius of the place: a *genius loci*, in the Roman model. As a *genius loci* the talented girl, restricted to home, generates her best creations from that home. Thus, Jo March’s most successful novels are written to please the readers at home, and to direct her creative energies to supporting her family and becoming the ‘heart of the house’⁷⁶. Katy does this through the years spent in the ‘School of Pain’, following a literal *katabasis*, when she falls from an unsafe swing and twists her spine: during the years of her adolescence, she is confined to bed and later a wheelchair; she learns to suppress her selfish desires, and to direct her creative energies to supporting her family and becoming the ‘heart of the house’⁷⁷.

These models are of course developmental models of childhood, where childhood is a progression towards adulthood, and in which the acquisition of abilities and knowledge, and the rejection of negative traits, are profoundly influenced by available social role models. This idealization of talented girls as tutelary deities points us towards a third set of ideas about classical reception and character in children’s literature. That is, the invocation of Pan and the *puer aeternus*, a model that begins to appear in the 1870s, and which takes hold of the representation of idealized childhood well into the first decade of the twentieth century. The *puer aeternus*, associated with Iacchus, a version of the god of the harvest, Dionysus (and incidentally, connected with the Eleusinian mysteries associated with the cult of Persephone), symbolizes eternal childhood. In late Victorian and Edwardian representations of idealized childhood, the *puer aeternus* symbolizes the separate, and superior, space and time of childhood - a childhood that rejects adulthood, does not want to grow up, and indeed sometimes refuses to grow up, as in the case of J M Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1902-1911).

This formulation, of course, sharply contrasts with the emphasis on coming of age, being educated, and childhood as a preparation for adulthood. Thus, Kenneth Grahame, in *The Golden Age* (1895), a nostalgic reflection on his own childhood, glorifies childhood as a pastoral idyll, run according to its own rules, impenetrable to adults, who have lost the ability to perceive through intuition and imagination, and who are instead bound by the rules of society, rather than the laws of nature. Barrie, in *Peter and Wendy* (1911), shows Peter Pan, as a sometimes menacing symbol of the delights and lawlessness of childhood, in Neverland, a carnivalesque pastoral space, which parodies the nursery of socialized urban children. Frances Hodgson Burnett depicts the Yorkshire boy, Dickon Sowerby, in *The Secret Garden*, as a wholesome pagan spirit of nature who teaches the protagonist, Mary Lennox about the growth and cycle of the seasons, enabling her to heal herself, and later to heal her cousin, Colin and the community of Misselthwaite Manor, both of which have broken down in misery following the death of Colin’s mother.

It was a very strange thing indeed. She quite caught her breath as she stopped to look at it. A boy was sitting under a tree, with his back against it, playing on a rough wooden pipe. He was a funny looking boy about twelve. He looked very clean and his nose turned up and his cheeks were as red as poppies and never had Mistress Mary seen such round and such blue eyes in any boy’s face. And on the trunk of the tree he leaned against, a brown squirrel was clinging and watching him, and from behind a bush nearby a cock pheasant was delicately stretching his neck to peep out, and quite near him were two rabbits sitting up and sniffing with tremulous noses -- and actually it appeared as if they were all drawing near to watch him and listen to the strange low little call his pipe seemed to make.

“Don’t tha’ move,” he said. “It’d flight ‘em.”

In all of these late-Victorian and Edwardian stories, childhood is divided from adulthood not because it is inferior to adulthood or because children need to be trained and educated in order to find appropriate roles, but because it is separate and superior, attuned to a pastoral and nostalgic spirit of nature presided over by pagan, rather than Christian gods.

Here we find classical imagery used to symbolize the genius of childhood itself - to truly be a child is to be innately talented, to be at one with nature, to have access to the imagination and powers of creativity, and to look cynically at the follies of adult life. It is a rejection of Victorian mores, an expression of alienation and worry about the modern world, and a rejection of adulthood as the
desirable end of childhood. Character development, in the terms in which Thomas Hughes or Susan Coolidge understand it, is irrelevant in this version of talented children, who possess, much in the way that Alice does in Wonderland, sufficient abilities to engage with the perils of fantasy. They also do not require training to reach adulthood.

Perhaps the most intriguing example comes from Edith Nesbit's 1907 novel, The Enchanted Castle. In this novel, three middle-class children, Kathleen, Jerry, and Jimmy, are marooned at school during the holidays, owing to measles at home. They seek and find adventure, when they explore a tunnel leading to a grand estate, which they dub the 'Enchanted Castle.' There they meet Mabel, the housekeeper's niece, who finds an enchanted wishing ring. Through this ring, the children learn about the dangers of getting what you wish for - the story is a chaotic cornucopia of various kinds of enchantments, transformations, and adventures, some quite frightening. Again, the classical emerges: this time, in the form of statues and temples dotted around the castle grounds, including temples of Flora and Phoebus, statues of Eros, Psyche, Hebe, Ganymede, and more. These statues are inspired by the Greek statue room at the British Museum which Nesbit enjoyed visiting as a child. When the girls are transformed into statues by the ring, they witness these classical statues coming to life, and are invited by Phoebus Apollo to join the gods in a feast:

"I thought it would feel stiff to be a statue, but it doesn't," said Mabel. "There is no stiffness about the immortals," laughed the Sun-god. "For tonight you are one of us."

And they join the gods at a picnic at the temple on the lake. They are a little frightened by the sudden coming to life of the statues, but recognize the different classical gods and goddesses - and enjoy the picnic.

The scenes, as Nesbit depicts them, are a mixture of the marvelous and the uncanny, and the mundane and middle-class. For instance, the gods' picnic is sanitized and wholesome, a nursery version of the Pantheon:

On the further side of the pool was a large group, so white that it seemed to make a great white hole in the trees. Some twenty or thirty figures there were in the group all statues and all alive. . . Some were pelting each other with roses so sweet that the girls could smell them even across the pool. Others were holding hands and dancing in a ring, and two were sitting on the steps playing cat's-cradle which is a very ancient game indeed with a thread of white marble.

As the new-comers advanced a shout of greeting and gay laughter went up. "Late again, Phoebus!" someone called out. And another: "Did one of your horses cast a shoe?" And yet another called out something about laurels.

In recognizing the classical pantheon, and joining in calmly with their picnic, the children show themselves to be educated middle-class children, not unduly fazed by this eruption of fantasy and enchantment. This shows them to be superior to the adults around them - some of whom are servants, some of whom are teachers, some of whom are aristocrats, and all of whom are completely unable to cope with the effects of enchantment. In an odd concluding plot point, the children restore the wealth of the estate to Lord Yalding, the impoverished owner, by revealing to him a cache of jewellery; they resolve his broken romance by bringing his lost love (their French teacher) to him. In celebration of the happy ending, the lovers and the children together, they revisit the statues, coming together to worship the moon:

Afterwards none of them could ever remember at all what had happened. But they never forgot that they had been somewhere where everything was easy and beautiful. And people who can remember even that much are never quite the same again. And when they came to talk of it next day they found that to each some little part of that night's great enlightenment was left.

All the stone creatures drew closer round the stone - the light where the moonbeam struck it seemed to break away in spray such as water makes when it falls from a height. All the crowd was bathed in whiteness. A deep hush lay over the vast assembly.

Then a wave of intention swept over the mighty crowd. All the faces, bird, beast, Greek statue, Babylonian monster, human child and human lover, turned upward, the radiant light illuminated them and one word broke from all.

"The light!" they cried, and the sound of their voice was like the sound of a great wave; "the light! the light!"

This kind of ecstatic pagan moon-worship, however, is unsustainable, particularly for Lord Yalding, who fears that he is losing his sanity. Accordingly, he and Mademoiselle deprive the ring of its magic powers, by wishing its enchantments at an end. With the ring's magic, magic leaves the enchanted castle, and the classical statues lose their vibrancy:

The enchanted light died away, the windows of granted wishes went out, like magic-lantern pictures. Gerald's candle faintly lighted a rudely arched cave, and where Psyche's statue had been was a stone with something carved on it.

Gerald held the light low.

"It is her grave," the girl said.

This curious book reinforces the divide between children and adults. The pastoral idyll of childhood can only be joined by lovers, and only temporarily, and not without exacting a toll on them, before the everyday socialized world reasserts itself. It does not do that, however, without regret. Psyche's statue, no longer a mythological girl in living stone, becomes a 'grave'; symbolic, perhaps, of what Nesbit (and other Edwardian writers) thinks adults can do to the child in themselves.
Childhood, then, is a talented space - the individual children in this book are not particularly interesting, brilliant, or memorable in themselves, but they are able to call adventure into being (in an early scene, Kathleen, Jerry and Jimmy march through town blowing on toy trumpets, before finding the passage that leads to the castle and to their adventures), and they are able to encounter the sometimes dangerous mythical and magical space without losing their wits.

Lewis Carroll's sly erudition, Farrar and Hughes's solemn moralizing, and the quasi-spiritualist pastiche of mysticism and nursery mythology seen in Burnett and Nesbit - to say nothing of the embedded mythic structures underpinning the novels discussed here - reveal a wide range of ways that ideas about classical antiquity can be used in children's literature - from the formal tradition that reveals social class, or gender roles, or educational background, to the archetypal pattern that shapes narrative. Of course, this variety is reflective of the complexity and richness of classical culture, the texts, history, and ideas of which permit and encourage multiple and shifting applications. It also reflects the richness and depth of the classical tradition, as a shared body of knowledge that pervades a wide variety of literatures and cultural contexts.

What I hope is also apparent is the way that understanding even in a small way the nuances and permutations of receptions and deployments of classical material helps understand other ideas: in this case, the connection to the representation of character and childhood in children's literature. Broadly speaking, we can see classical references, allusions, ideas, and narrative structures playing a significant part in the transition from a moralistic and developmental representation of childhood as a state of being that requires education, training, and improvement before the onset of adulthood, to a static, almost anti-developmental version of idealized childhood that is superior to adulthood.

I hope, too, that I have conveyed that the reverse is also true: that children's literature offers a vibrant and vital place to see the changing receptions and engagements with classical material - not just in the literature itself, but in the formation of children's sense of culture. For many young readers, either in the period in which these novels were published, or in the decades since, classical moments in children's literature will act as a confirmation and elaboration of material they may have been taught in the classical classroom. The novels examined here, of course, are not specifically classical in intent and purpose: they are not historical novels, set in Ancient Greece or Rome; they do not set out to teach classical material to child readers. That occurs in other genres. But in demonstrating the casual integration of classical material and classical knowledge into children's novels, they may have offered many young readers an intriguing entry into the subject - leading them to take their own classical journeys later.

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