

"Visual Culture and the 'Alice' Books" by Erin Clark Frost

Erin Clark Frost

Erin Clark Frost is a graduate assistant at Illinois State University. She is pursuing a PhD with specializations in rhetoric and composition, technical communication, and women's and gender studies. She especially enjoys studying visible rhetoric and culture.

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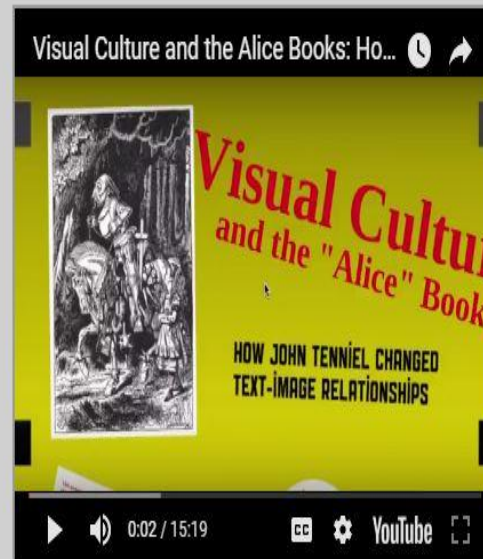
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This text document on this and the following pages is a companion text to the multimodal presentation of the same title. The multimodal presentation, included in the YouTube movie below, lets readers experience the visual aspects of this work and represents the normalization of new and innovative formats.



This presentation asserts that John Tenniel's illustrations were and are integral to the *Alice* books and that those illustrations changed text-image relationships in history. First, we note that Tenniel's illustrations cannot be divorced from the cultural meanings that *Alice* carries today. Later in this presentation, we will discuss the social importance of a practice called appropriation. The importance of Tenniel's work to modern multimodal composing practices is apparent because of the continued appropriation of his work today in the venues of Disney movies and the world of art. Secondly, the context of Tenniel's life changed how people read the *Alice* books, therefore playing into the aforementioned point about texts and images today, and also affecting the way that the *Alice* books went down in history. Finally, then, I suggest that the context and importance of Tenniel's images altered the way texts with images are read, foreshadowing the Internet era and the multimodal composing possibilities that are available today.

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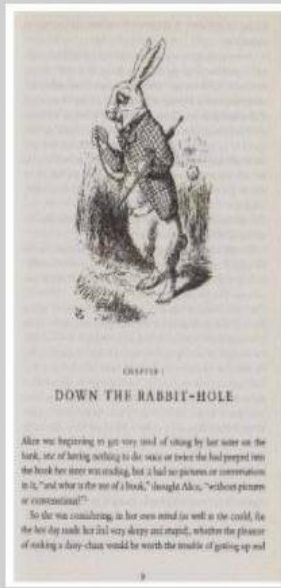
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This is the first page of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Readers can see right away that images are important because it is an image that first appears. In fact, the only thing preceding this page in the work is the introductory poem by Lewis Carroll. This first paragraph demonstrates very early on that Carroll knows how important images will be to his text. At the end of the paragraph, we see, "And what is the use of a book, thought Alice, without pictures or conversations?" This is Carroll explicitly telling us that illustrations are vitally important to his work. Furthermore, Carroll originally wrote this story for his child friend, Alice Liddell; he also did his own illustrations for this version. When he later decided to publish the work, he sought out a professional illustrator—but not just any professional illustrator. Carroll sought the services of John Tenniel, because Tenniel was the best, and Carroll knew that illustrations would be highly important.

The illustration of the white rabbit is iconic today. I argue that a great many of Tenniel's illustrations—especially those from the *Alice* works—are iconic in modern times. The use of the word icon today brings to mind a computer screen. Although this is not the main usage I am interested in here, my thesis certainly has implications for the usage of computers.

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Cheshire Cat & Dodo

The first definition you do see here is: "a religious image painted on a wood panel" (*The Merriam Webster Dictionary*). This has implications for our study for two reasons. First the purpose and goals of children's literature in the 1800s were typically very prescribed. They were faith-based lessons for children about right and wrong. Carroll and Tenniel were poking fun at the usual moral imperative that is found in children's literature of the period. In playing with sense and nonsense, Carroll and Tenniel were creating a text where there was no lesson; it was a text purely for fun. The wood panel is also important and has historical significance because Tenniel's original illustrations for the *Alice* books were prepared using the woodcut method. This means, after he created the illustrations, he would have had them carved into a block of wood and they were then essentially stamped onto the pages during the printing process. In this way, Tenniel's *Alice* images are—literally iconic. Finally, the second definition is one distilled from popular culture. An icon, or something that is iconic, is a representative symbol. President Barack Obama may be considered an icon of the healthcare movement. Madonna could be called an icon of materialism. The Beatles are certainly iconic of the 1960s and 1970s. Notice, however, that these associations are all visual. The word *icon* always calls up images in our minds.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in his book *What Do Pictures Want?*, provides a helpful explanation of what the icon means culturally. The icon is the "fitness" of phenomenological apprehension, the basic play of presence and absences, substance and shadow, likeness and difference, that makes perception and imaging possible" (74). In making perception and imaging possible, the icon proves that visual images affect the way we think about cultural texts. Tenniel's illustrations, then, are iconic to the Carroll texts. They cannot be separated. The illustrations have become a part of the text over the years and are culturally implicated in more ways that we can ever know.



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Thomas Wartenberg has told us that "the illustrations"—and he's talking about Tenniel's illustrations specifically—"have become iconic for the various characters, the imaginative activity involved in reading the textcum- illustrations is now simply part of what the book is" (26). The images shown here demonstrate this. The image on the left is the Cheshire Cat as drawn by Tenniel. The image on the right is a still taken from the 1951 Disney movie *Alice in Wonderland*. It is easy to see upon even a cursory examination that the Disney illustrators drew on Tenniel's work during the creation of the Cheshire Cat for Disney. Not only is the cat occupying the same bodily position, but despite being slightly more caricatured, he appears very much the same.



The Dodo is another example of where we can see this echo occurring. The image at left is left is Tenniel's illustration; the image at right is the Disney version. The Disney illustrators maintained the Dodo's distinctive shape as well as several small physical markers of sophistication. They could have done something wildly different based upon the fact that not many people know what the extinct dodo bird actually looks like.

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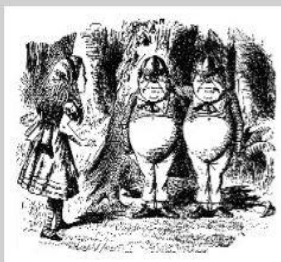
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The Brothers Tweedle

These pictures are also interesting because they suggest a possibility that the Disney illustrators stayed more true to Tenniel's illustrations than the Disney writers did to Carroll's text.

This final set of images shows the brothers Tweedle—Tweedledee and Tweedledum. I think it's apparent that if Tenniel were alive today and maintained a copyright on this image, he would certainly have grounds for a lawsuit based upon how close these images are. The Disney illustrators certainly drew upon Tenniel's work in representing Carroll's text in their movie.



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It's important also to know the context of Sir John Tenniel and how people would have known him in the 1860s and 1870s when he was working on the *Alice* books. Tenniel was knighted in 1893, underlining the cultural importance of his work ("Sir John Tenniel"). Tenniel was also a children's illustrator for other works as well as being a political cartoonist for *Punch* magazine. His name was almost synonymous with *Punch*. In fact, when people picked up *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, they likely would have known John Tenniel's name and not Lewis Carroll's. In 1865, Tenniel agreed to illustrate *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* for Carroll—nothing short of a miracle given his heavy workload, but Carroll was very convincing. In 1872 he agreed to collaborate with Carroll again on *Through the Looking Glass*, although after that he called the man impossible and refused to ever work with Carroll again.

Besides being an important political cartoonist of the era and a popular children's illustrator, Tenniel was also known for his work in high art and he certainly would have known what was happening on the art scene. Realism and naturalism were in vogue at this time, and both of these movements had artists attempting to portray objects as they truly are. In naturalism, it is particularly important that an object be shown in its natural environment. Obviously some tensions quickly arise with Carroll's text and Tenniel's illustrations. A hookah, for example, is not traditionally found in the hands of a caterpillar on the back of a mushroom. The art scene—and Tenniel—was also starting to revert to some pre-Raphael influences at this time. Raphael introduced a style of art in which flaws were glossed over and pieces looked almost airbrushed. This reversion to a style that tried to get at the real eventually gave rise to surrealism. This was after Tenniel's death, but it's likely that Tenniel had a great influence on the surrealist movement. Surrealism focused on the role of the unconscious in art, flaws and all, and it broke down the line between what is real and what is imaginary, playing with the tension also between sense and nonsense, a tension that runs throughout the *Alice* books. It's important to understand that Tenniel knew the art scene at the time of these illustrations and that many of his readers would have understood these things as well.

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Political Cartoons

However, the context Tenniel was most known for was his work as a political cartoonist. The first cartoon on this page, which was published in *Punch*, is known as the "Nemesis of Neglect." It's a commentary on the Jack the Ripper murders, putting forth an argument that parallels the modern argument that poverty breeds crime. Tenniel was not afraid to tackle tough subjects like war, as shown in the image below, "The Catch-Penny," and he dove into issues that were very political, such as unionization, shown in the third image, as well. Tenniel was unafraid to talk about nationality and ethnicity, as shown by his cartoon depicting the Irish land question being taken by the horns.



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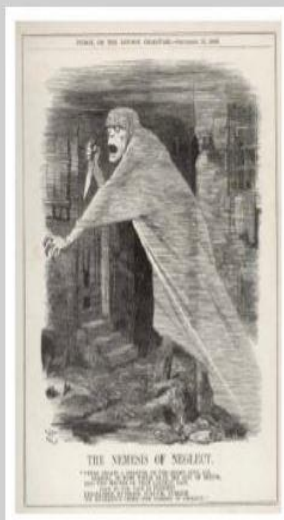
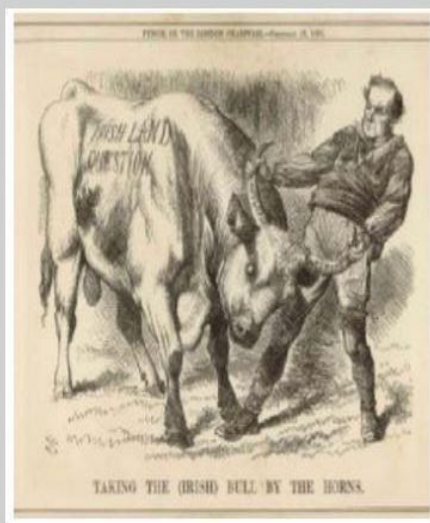
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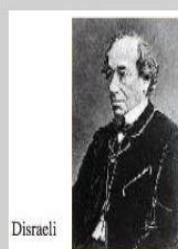
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THE HATTER

Tenniel did a lot of work that still echoes in today's popular culture, as we see in the image "The Patient Ass," where the animal is being crushed under the weight of increasing income taxes. These images would have been works that people in Tenniel's time might have known him for, and therefore when they picked up the *Alice* works, they would have known that there might be some subtexts running through Tenniel's illustrations. This would have changed the way they read the texts, setting the stage for major changes in the ways we conceptualize conversations taking place between images and text.



There were other subtexts in *Alice* that likely got people thinking this way about Tenniel's illustrations. First, he used historical models for his characters. The Hatter, perhaps the most popular *Alice* character except for *Alice* herself, was likely modeled on Theophilus Carter, a sort of zany inventor of the day (Carroll, Haughton, and Tenniel 310). Carter was most well known for his invention of the combined bed and alarm clock, which dumped the sleeper into a tub of cold water upon waking to ensure that he didn't go back to sleep. Tenniel was also known for his political caricatures of figures like Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, both of whom were British politicians and prime ministers in this era. It has been suggested and is widely believed that Gladstone is the goat and Disraeli is the man dressed in white paper and in this illustration from the beginning of *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll, Haughton, and Tenniel xlviii).



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A twist on appropriation is the theory of rhetorical velocity advanced by James Ridolfo. Ridolfo says rhetorical velocity is "a theory of rhetorical delivery where a rhetorician strategizes the ways in which a third party may revise, recompose, and redistribute a text." Therefore, an author or artist who has an understanding of rhetorical velocity might anticipate the appropriation of his or her own work in the future. Tenniel is not the only artist to use appropriation, of course, and it is interesting to note the cultural and rhetorical velocity of his work as people continue to appropriate it. The image at left is "Dropping the Pilot," an image drawn by Tenniel and published in *Punch*. It depicts German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck Wilhelm debarking ship as German Emperor Wilhelm II looks on. Wilhelm had demanded von Bismarck's resignation and ultimately gathered enough power to force it.

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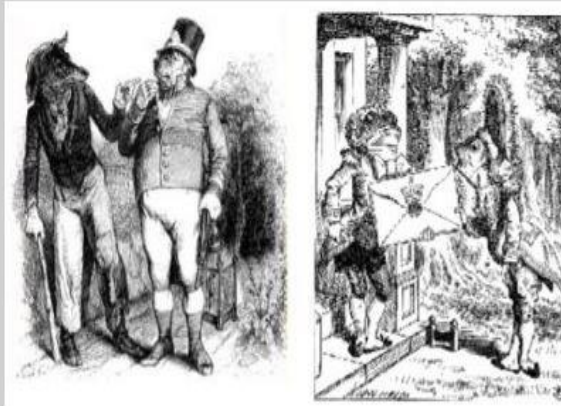
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Appropriation



Another important strategy that Tenniel used to imbue his work with meaning was appropriation. Appropriation is the "act of borrowing, stealing, or taking over others' meanings to one's own ends. Cultural appropriation is the process of 'borrowing' and changing the meaning of commodities, cultural products, slogans, images, or elements of fashion. In addition, appropriation is one of the primary forms of oppositional production and reading, when, for instance, viewers take cultural products and re-edit, rewrite, or change them in some way" (Sturken and Cartwright 350). Tenniel made use of cultural appropriation, and here is just one example. The image at the left is "The Wolf and the Dog" by French artist J.J. Grandville, a contemporary of Tenniel's. The image at the right is the famous Frog Footman from the "Pig and pepper" chapter of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It's fairly obvious upon looking at these two images that Tenniel drew upon Grandville's work in his production of these characters. However, some critics have suggested that there is more to it than that. Based on the depiction of the Frog Footman, the character at left in Tenniel's illustration, critics have suggested that Tenniel's work is a commentary on French culture. The Frog Footman's dress and posture appear to be somewhat arrogant or pompous, perhaps conveying Tenniel's opinion of the French. If this is the case, then Tenniel drew a piece of art from a French artist and turned it back on itself, using it to poke fun at the nationality of the original artist.

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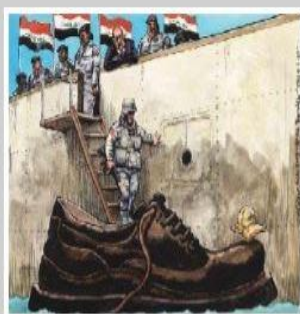
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The image below, drawn by modern cartoonist Steve Bell, appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper. It's titled "Iraqis Celebrate the Withdrawal of American Combat Troops." It clearly demonstrates Bell drawing on Tenniel, but Bell also adds more modern elements in order to alter the meaning of the cartoon in order to make it significant to a modern context.



"Tenniel is credited with changing the direction of English political caricature . . . for bringing artistic skill, impartiality, and wit" ("Sir John Tenniel" 201). In introducing these elements to the *Alice* books, and because of the context he brought from his own life, Tenniel forever changed the trajectory of text-image partnerships by demonstrating the possibilities for placing them in intertextual conversation. Not only were Tenniel's illustrations such an integral part of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through The Looking Glass* that they cannot be divorced from the meaning of the texts today, but also the historical context of Tenniel's life created a very particular rhetorical situation for readers of the time. This rhetorical situation affected the way we read texts with images today, and ultimately foreshadowed the Internet age and the multimodal possibilities available to us today.

As Ann Wysocki explains, images and texts are more entwined than we might think. Both are limited by the constraints placed upon us in shaping them, but these constraints are also artifacts of our realities. On page 58 of "Awaywithwords," Wysocki says:

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It is also worth considering what happens when “image” is used to represent all that is not made exclusively of words. First, even if I were to pretend that the repertoire of communication materials available to us has nothing to do with other practices that shape what we do in the world, I think that “images”—if by that term we mean what many of us implicitly imagine when the term is used, a page-sized or no more than 3 by 3 realistically representational photograph, drawing, or painting—nonetheless exceed logics of space.

Thus, we must consider what we mean when we talk about texts, for—as shown by Tenniel’s effect upon Carroll’s writings—images and writings are integrated in such a way as to make it impossible to talk about one without calling up—at the least—echoes of the other. The consequences of this are that we work in forms that we call texts, but which are actually integrated image-texts. This is a consequence of the constraints we work under, which actually reflect our belief systems about images and writings.

Reflecting on Tenniel’s work and its consequences for the Alice books can help us discover the ways in which we must rethink our own abilities to separate word from image. The implication here is not that contemporary scholars must continue to seek out the connections between images and texts, but that we must work to reconceptualize our understanding of those two entities. This presentation, for example, works because of two separate files: an audio file and a Prezi. But neither of these files makes sense alone, and neither of these files could ever have existed alone. They are intertwined in their very existence, just as all images and texts are not so separate as we might think.

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