Alice’s New Wonderland

*Once Upon a Time* is a television entertainment program that has forever changed the cinematic fairy tale. Throughout its entirety, the show has depicted dozens of stories in an entirely new fashion. One of the most recent portrayals in the show is none other than Alice from the classic story, *Alice in Wonderland*. In this version, Alice—also known as Tilly—is the daughter of Mother Nature and Captain Hook (Horowitz and Kitsis). Along with many magical qualities, she also possesses traits that many modern-day Americans can relate to as well. *Once Upon a Time*’s representation of Alice has been modernized from both the original version and Tim Burton’s cinematic rendition to address the new commonalities of this century such as sexuality, mental health disorders, abandonment, and feminism.

The growth in the LGBTQ+ community has become very prominent in recent years. Reflecting this movement in society, television shows and cinema have moved to incorporate LGBTQ+ characters; *Once Upon a Time* is no different. Alice/Tilly is one of the many characters in the show demonstrating a different sexual orientation. While her true love starts with a man, she ends the show with a female partner (Horowitz and Kitsis). However, society was different and less accepting in the past.
No one understands this concept more than Julia Taylor, who has generated a written evolution of bisexuality by investigating cultural awareness. Until recently, she describes bisexuality as an “emergence to the shadows” (Taylor 103). While the expansion in sexuality was starting to become a more common occurrence, it was still being received negatively by most of society. While there is no data referencing the decade of the original *Alice in Wonderland*, there is research concerning the time frame of the 2010 Disney film directed by Tim Burton. While the original Alice was too young to have a love interest, Tim Burton’s Alice is faced with many male suitors including the Mad Hatter himself. However, she rejects all of them (Burton). This solidifies the fact that there is no definitive proof of her sexuality. This is appropriate due to society’s then current split between acceptance and denial of the LGBTQ+ community (Taylor 103). Because of the controversy at the time, it makes sense as why Tim Burton would toe the line without crossing it. Recently, society has significantly expanded its mindset due to the surfacing of various terminology for sexual preferences (Taylor 107). *Once Upon a Time’s* Alice/Tilly is yet another vessel promoting the growth and contrast of this decade. However, another growing thread of this generation is mental health.

Along with sexuality, mental health (or more importantly, its deterioration) has become a mainstream topic over the past ten years. In an issue of “Clinical Psychology Review,” studies of the MMPI scale have shown that there has been a steady increase in young-adult psychopathic deviation since 1938 (Twenge et. al 149). Teenagers are becoming more and more susceptible to mental illness whether it be depression, anxiety, or others. The media has come to reflect mental health awareness with books, movies, and television shows alike. Some popular examples include the Netflix show, *13 Reasons Why*, and the motion-picture, *Split*. In *Once Upon a Time*, Alice/Tilly seems to be struggling with Schizophrenia. She takes medication to prevent herself
from confusion and committing dangerous acts. She also believes that everyone possesses an alter-ego that they are not aware of (Horowitz and Kitsis). While she was right in the end, the beliefs and actions that Alice/Tilly display are common symptoms of Schizophrenia, a mental disease that is seen every day in the real world.

Mental illnesses were not always such a significant part of society’s culture, but the evolution of social factors may be to blame. A research study focused on social stigmatization found that the “stigma society attaches to individuals has a lot to do with the particular disorder one struggles with” (Khest-Masjedi, Mahnaz Fallahi, et. al 1) Teenage patients suffering with psychotic disease such as Schizophrenia attempted to hide their disease by self-isolation to avoid social stigma, much like the “modern-day-Alice.”

In addition to the inner-turmoil over the sexual changes that Alice/Tilly is going through, her psychotic illness is only worsened by stress throughout the show. Having spent most of her life alone in a tower, she begins to show obvious signs of madness in a scene depicting a tea party between her and a variety of stuffed animals (Horowitz and Kitsis). She also becomes the lead suspect in multiple murders due to her unexplainable appearances at the crime scenes. She even believes she is guilty for a short time (Horowitz and Kitsis). However, Alice/Tilly was framed due to society’s willingness to accept and expect criminal acts from psychotic patients. Once Upon a Time has combined aspects of the Mad Hatter with Alice’s character to show the current social stigma and influence on mental health.

The original Mad Hatter was just that—mad. Walt Disney did not attach specific mental illnesses to this character. In the 1950’s, America was deinstitutionalizing psychiatric hospitals as a result of Harry Truman’s movement to decrease mental illness with the National Mental Health Act (“History of Mental Health Treatment”). The Mad Hatter and his alternative realm
may have been shifted in perception to symbolize America’s stigma on all psychiatric patients at the time. Anyone who didn’t fit the social normality was treated with negativity and a fear of the unknown. Therefore, the Mad Hatter is portrayed with annoying characteristics.

Tim Burton’s transitioning film does not offer much insight into the rabbit hole that is mental illness. The Mad Hatter is still mad, but he is depicted as a more relatable character with morals and emotions. His proclamation of love for Alice, along with the actions he commits to prove them, gives dimension to a man previously defined with the word, “mad” (Burton). This again is an accurate portrayal of society’s evolution. It supports the fact that individuals suffering from mental health issues are considered with the same courtesy as everyone else.

Alice/Tilly also suffers from more noticeable conditions that viewers tend to pick up more. In *Once Upon a Time*, she constantly is a victim of abandonment. In the original 1951 film, Alice leaves of her own accord out of curiosity (Disney). In the adaptation film, Alice leaves with a desperate need to get away from the people around her (Burton). Unlike any of the previous stories, Alice/Tilly is the one left behind. Why is this?

In the 1950s, times were stricter and more conformed. Single parenting was frowned upon, and many cultures were still unsure about the idea of adoption. To put it simply, child abandonment was not a normal occurrence. Bringing it to a modern-day viewpoint, those standards have been warped drastically. Ethically speaking, a child can only be labeled as “legally abandoned” in the case that both parents have dismissed parental obligations (Giordan 29). Many guardians in her life have neglected Alice/Tilly, but it reflects the ethical frustrations that children are currently going through.
Her mother, who uses her birth for selfish gain, first abandons her; her father also unwillingly must leave her in many parts of the show. In one of the longest periods, Alice/Tilly is homeless in the modern-day setting that is Hyperion Heights. This is due to the curse that separates her from her father. To her knowledge, she is without family, friends, and her only acquaintance is the chief of police (Horowitz and Kitsis).

As stated by Mark Greenburg in a 2015 research study, most victim’s cases (63.4 percent) involve neglect rather than abuse. However, “both forms of child maltreatment can have serious life-long consequences on a child’s mental, physical, and social well-being” (Greenburg). The percentage is steadily increasing, and it is worse in heavily populated areas such as cities. Alice/Tilly is one of the few characters represented in the media, including Once Upon a Time, raising awareness for the very real effects of child abuse and neglect.

The issues and mainstream events that society deems important have evolved greatly over the years. This has been documented through the storylines that have taken place in cinematic works. Alice in Wonderland has progressed from a story about a young child getting lost in a fantasy world to a very real woman dealing with the obstacles concurrent of this decade. Once Upon a Time has always attached modern features to characters, but Alice/Tilly is the unexpected result of America’s evolution.


“History of Mental Health Treatment.” *Dual Diagnosis*, 2014.
