

PAUL LAFFOLEY (b. 1940, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

Alice Pleasance Liddell, 1968

Oil, Acrylic, Ink on Canvas

73 1/2 x 49 1/2 in.

Subject: The Real Alice

Symbol Evocation: The Awakening of Sexuality

Comments:

In 1863 Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832-1898), an Oxford Don, made a photograph of Alice Pleasance Liddell (the source of the main image of this painting). Right after that he approached her father Mr. Liddell (then Dean of Oxford) for the hand of Alice (the oldest of Liddell's three daughters) in marriage. Charles was 31 and Alice was 11. The outraged Dean dismissed Dodgson's proposal in typical Victorian, melodramatic style: "Never darken my door again. You are forbidden to see Alice ever. You are the son of an archdeacon!" Of course, in the insular world of English 19th century "ivory- towerhood," nothing of the sort happened. Dodgson "retired" to his study at Christ Church, Oxford to then assume the mantle of his alter ego- Lewis Carroll- to write and publish his collected "love poems," which he had told as stories on various outings to his young friend with the title *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The year was 1865. By 1872 when Alice was 20 years old (and had been safely married off to someone named Hargreaves, undoubtedly orchestrated by Dean Liddell) Dodgson, again as Carroll, published the dark and labyrinthine sequel to *Wonderland* entitled *Through the Looking Glass*. This was also the year he took the last photograph of Alice he ever would. Again Alice is seated in a chair, but this time she was not posed sideways on a functional upright-- ready to move in the future. Instead Alice is shown laid-back and crest fallen in a velvet covered "overstuffed". She appears to be contemplating the sad fact that at 20 the best part of her life is now over. The two photographs side by side form the classic "before and after" shots. I chose to be concerned with the "before" pose-- the real Alice.

Pedophilia (a sexual perversion in which children are preferred sexual objects to adults), which today on the absolute evil scale is considered up there with the Holocaust of World War II, as unforgivable sins, is often of what Dodgson is accused. Some of his biographers point to his numerous "little girl friends" as an indication of his pathology. But there is no evidence that he ever consummated any of his desires. The fact that Dodgson (an extremely shy person who had a stuttering problem) actually asked permission to legally marry Alice, and the fact that he was allowed to continue to write letters to her and the other little girls he knew even when they became married women, I feel proves otherwise. Dodgson was not like some others of his time who were on the edge sexually such as: 1) Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883), the translator of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*-- a closet homosexual; or 2) Frederick Rolfe (1860-1913, alias Baron Corvo), best known as the author of *Hadrian the Seventh*, who as a Catholic convert at seven years old lived a lonely, arrogant, peckish existence as a pauper-genius while denying sex itself; or 3) Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), the ill-fated but ever flamboyant playwright and toast of the Old and New World, who was imprisoned for homosexual offenses and died in exile in Paris, having to use the pseudonym Sebastian Melmoth for survival purposes for himself and his alienated wife and family; or 4) the great American writer of that era Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) who married his cousin Virginia when he was 27 and she was 13. The person that Dodgson was most like, however, was Edward Lear (1812-1888), the eccentric inventor of nonsense poetry and illustration for children. In fact, Lear's work was the major influence on the writing of Dodgson. They shared many of the same friends even though Lear was 20 years the elder. They also shared something else--they were both asexual as adults (brought on by childhood trauma). In other words they were both sexual and emotional neurasthenics. This was no problem to Edward Lear, who as the youngest of 21 children had early on in his life retreated into an infantilized state that had allowed him to blend in perfectly with the Victorian sexual repression of the day. The situation was somewhat different, however, for Dodgson. He was placed by his position as an Oxford Don in the continuous presence of healthy young people who were successfully completing their sexual maturity. The painful contrast of these others with himself drove him into a kind of voyeurism- not of explicit sexual acts- but of the emotional states of preadolescents on the verge of initiation into the full glories of a Cosmic Eros (which others, other than Dodgson, would call authentic adult love). He was emotionally stuck as a result of his father's repression and invalidation at this preadolescent stage. Being heterosexual Dodgson turned to young girls for help in his psychological dilemma--especially Alice to whom he was attracted. Of course, this was his sin. He took

advantage of Alice's vulnerability to the "crush"--that is a young girl's infatuation with prominent men (the "Prince Charmings") of their immediate acquaintance impelled by an as yet unresolved "Electra Complex" concerning the love of their father. In an attempt to solve his own emotional problems, Dodgson produced some of the world's immortal literature, but at the same time he ruined the love life of Alice. However, in the end one might say in his defense that he really did love Alice, as he became "la grande passion" of her life. Well, as much as any "young boy of ten" could love "an older woman" of eleven.