

Shine Bright LLCE Cycle Terminal

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Chapter 7: A Mad Tea-Party

There was a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare¹ and the Hatter were having tea at it: a Dormouse² was sitting between them, fast asleep, and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and the talking over its head. "Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse," thought Alice; "only, as it's asleep, I suppose it doesn't mind."

The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it: "No room! No room!" they cried out when they saw Alice coming. "There's PLENTY of room!" said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

"Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. "I don't see any wine," she remarked.

"There isn't any," said the March Hare.

"Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it," said Alice angrily.

"It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited," said the March Hare.

"I didn't know it was YOUR table," said Alice; "it's laid for a great many more than three."

"Your hair wants cutting," said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

"You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice said with some severity; "it's very rude."

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he SAID was, “Why is a raven³ like a writing-desk?”

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles.—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that, ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like!’”

“You might just as well say,” added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe!’”

“It is the same thing with you,” said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn’t much.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865

1. *lièvre de Mars* 2. *loir* 3. large black bird

The Mad Hatter's Secret Ingredient: Math

Author Lewis Carroll was also a math teacher in Oxford, England, and mathematicians say the Alice books are full of algebraic lessons—such as why a raven is like a writing desk.

That's the riddle¹ the Mad Hatter asks Alice. And, as Weekend Edition Math Guy Keith Devlin tells NPR's Jacki Lyden, "That particular scene—and lots of other scenes in *Alice in Wonderland*—were a reflection on the increasing abstraction that was going on in mathematics in the 19th century."

Carroll, whose real name was Charles Dodgson, was a very conservative, traditional mathematician, Devlin says, and he didn't like the changes some were bringing to the discipline of mathematics.

"To him, algebra was all about numbers," Devlin says. But in the 19th century, people were developing all kinds of bizarre new algebras, where x times y was not equal to y times x .

So why is a raven like a writing desk? Because the new mathematics didn't make sense to Carroll. "Lots of things that every common-sense person would say are different in this new mathematics turned out to be the same," Devlin says—a point Carroll found ripe² for satire.

National Public Radio, 2010

1. *devinette* 2. *propice*