“What Is the Fun?” Said Alice

“What is the fun?” Alice asks the Gryphon in chapter 9 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Remember, the Queen of Hearts has just left Alice with this frightening creature, who, rousing from sleep and rubbing his eyes, watches the Queen walk away and then chuckles, “What fun!” The Queen is off to “see after some executions”, and Alice naturally wonders where the fun is in this. But her question might just as well refer to all that has happened so far in the story. Look at Alice's adventures to this point: bored with listening to her sister read a story, Alice notices a white rabbit who talks to itself and who wears expensive clothes; following the rabbit, she falls down a hole in the ground, finally landing—with two suitably exclamatory thumps!—on some sticks and dry leaves. Here she finds herself trapped in a long, low hall; she changes size each time she eats or drinks anything; she nearly drowns in her own tears; she finds herself in the company of a bunch of “queer looking” creatures; she is trapped again, this time in a rabbit's house while trying to do him a favour; after fending off a lizard, she is pelted by pebbles that turn into cakes; she shrinks so small that a puppy threatens her life; a three-inch caterpillar has the effrontery to treat her like a child; a pigeon calls her names; after escaping with a baby from a fusillade of saucepans and dishes, she finds that the baby is really a pig; she meets a cat who tells her she is crazy, and who keeps disappearing and reappearing in parts; she is *persona non grata* at a tea party where the other guests are either mad or asleep; and finally she arrives at the court of the King and Queen of Hearts where she is forced to play croquet with flamingoes and hedgehogs as mallets and balls, and where every instant the virago Queen...
sentences someone to execution. Need we wonder why Alice asks, "What is the fun?"

It is my experience that many readers ask this same question. For them, and perhaps at times for Alice, this dream is a nightmare. True, the book has provided fun for mathematicians who wax ecstatic over Alice's recitation of the four times table; for historians who translate Alice into a "sweet and innocent undergraduate" exploring "the Wonderland of Victorian Oxford"; for philosophers who remain undaunted because "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland contains fewer references to philosophy than does Through the Looking Glass"; for literary critics who study the first Alice book as a Bildungsroman, or who search out "evidence of allegory and satire"; and for psychologists who see a phallus where stands a little girl. But such fun is not everyone's cup of tea, and it is hardly what the Gryphon means or what Alice looks for. And make no mistake, poor Alice is looking for fun, for something more interesting than her sister's story. Alice's idea of fun manifests itself in her desultory consideration whether or not to fashion a daisy chain, a scintillating activity much practised by many a pretty Victorian ingenue, especially the type immortalised by Charlotte Yonge. Instead of making her daisy chain, Alice falls down a rabbit-hold, and her notions of fun receive a thumping. So: what is the fun in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland?

Before answering this question, we might usefully examine more fully Alice's idea of fun in order to understand why she should even ask such a question. We have noticed that Alice thinks making daisy chains is fun. She also thinks riddles are fun, but not when they have no answers. The rule is: where there is a riddle, there is an answer. So when the Mad Hatter confronts her with a riddle without an answer, Alice is bewildered. Where is the fun in this? As far as Alice is concerned, there must be something better to do with the time than indulge in such tomfoolery. Later, when she plays croquet, Alice bursts out laughing at the antics of her flamingo, but her fun is brief and she soon complains that the game lacks rules, that the players quarrel, and that the whole thing is confusing. Then she meets the Gryphon and asks, "What is the fun?" Alice does not have the receptivity of the child, and her question indicates that she has missed the point all along. Remember, her idea of fun is making a daisy chain. Nevertheless, she had begun her adventures in the right spirit by entering the rabbit-hold without "once considering how in the world she was to get out again"; but when she replaces