



Tenniel's White Rabbit

The White Rabbit: Sacred and Subversive

Rachel McRoberts

Author Note: Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Rachel McRoberts, info@rachelmcroberts.com

Rachel McRoberts: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9660-667X>

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Abstract: This piece addresses personal and collective symbolism surrounding the White Rabbit. Through descriptions of associative and analytic modes of thought, in artwork, sandplay, and research from a post-modern, feminist perspective, the author explores this symbol up, down, and through, paralleling Alice's dream state adventures and adding to the body of literature on the White Rabbit, curiously absent in the field of sandplay.

Keywords: white rabbit, symbol, sandplay, feminist, mid-life, subversive, literature, curious, Alice, Wonderland, Jung, Kalf, Nietzsche

The White Rabbit: Sacred and Subversive

The White Rabbit has always been a symbolic companion of mine. Since I was a child, I have collected Alice in Wonderland and Through the Lookingglass (Carroll, 1865/1871/1960) memorabilia, most of it given to me as gifts from loved ones. From porcelain figurines and embellished teacups, to indie theater posters and interpretations in perfumery, White Rabbits dot my home and studio (see Figures 1- 3).



Figure 1 Selection of White Rabbit memorabilia from author's personal collection. Perfume by Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab. Tea-set by Rutter Porzellan, Germany (1993).

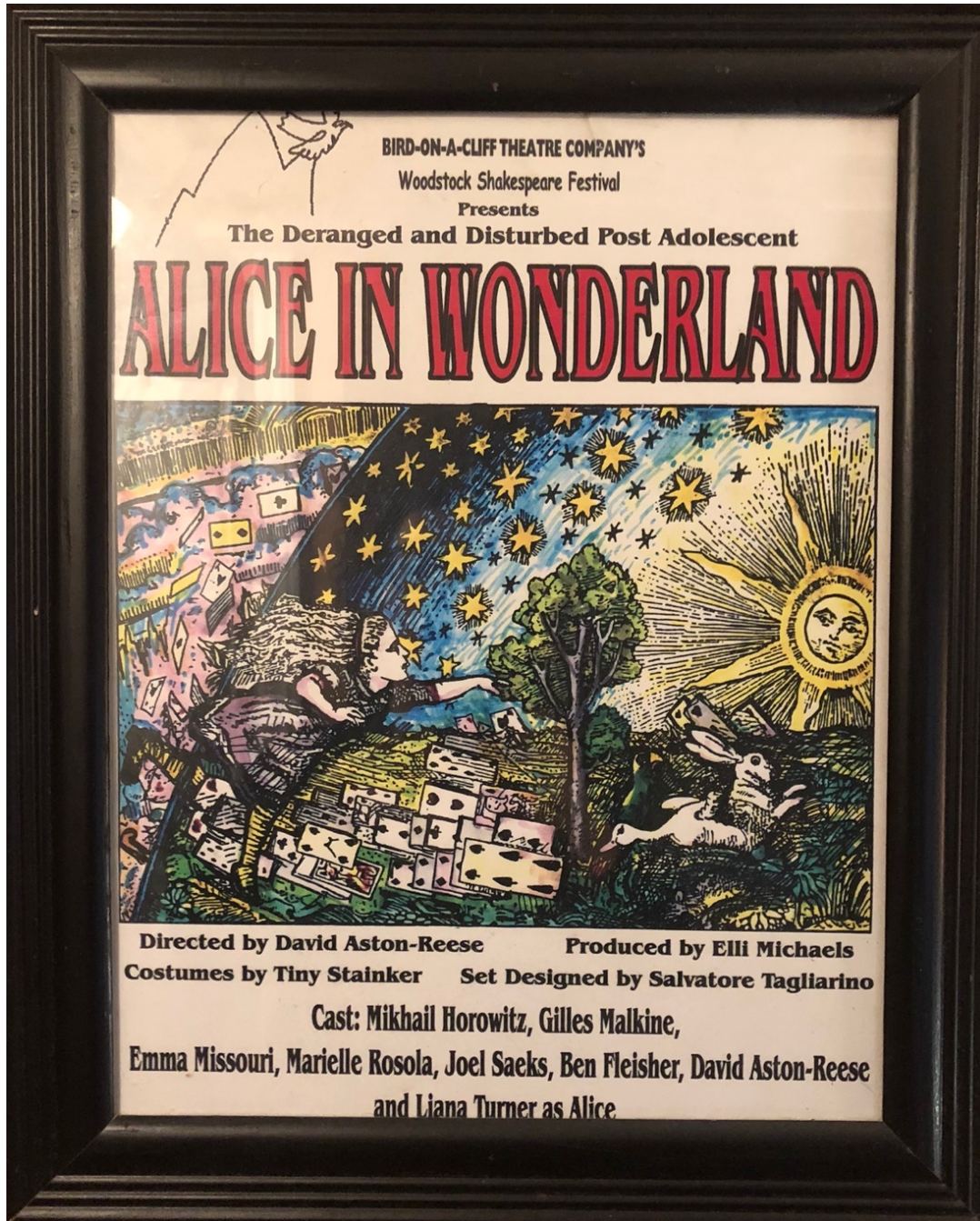


Figure 2 *Bird-On-A-Cliff Theatre Co. (late 1990's). Alice in Wonderland theater poster from author's personal collection.*



Figure 3 McRoberts, (N.D.). *The Rabbit's House*. [Assemblage & Mixed Media: Ornaments, marionette, handmade bottle and tag, greeting card, dried flowers, wood]. Author's personal collection.

I have often remarked over the years that the spirit of the White Rabbit guides my life, pulling me with curiosity, like Alice, to my next adventure. Now approaching mid-life, transitioning personally and professionally, it seems fitting to deeply visit the White Rabbit, taking yet another dive “down the rabbit hole”.

Preparing for A Reintroduction

Having spent the past few years intensely engaged in earning my Ph.D. in counselor education and supervision, where I engaged in a personal sandplay process and studied the creativity in sandplay therapists for my dissertation (McRoberts, 2020), I found my life in transition. During the COVID-19 pandemic I had reached my terminal degree, and both my children had graduated from high school. It seemed strange to be reaching such milestones while cloistered in lockdown, not unlike a rabbit’s clutch. With encouragement from beloved mentors, I decided to begin writing my first symbol paper towards certification as a sandplay therapist through the Sandplay Therapists of America (2019). However, I felt a bit stuck creatively, psychically, and in writing about my beloved symbol. While so powerful and dear to me emotionally, when I attempted to write, my thoughts and words were jumbled, so I avoided it for some time. I was aware, through my recent creativity research, that I had been over exercising my analytic mode of thought, and held my associative processes in a sacred space that was somewhat intimidating to transverse alone, especially in the early stages of creation here.

To embrace the White Rabbit fully, I knew I needed to let go. But I knew that by following the White Rabbit, I, like Alice, would be, to a degree, abandoning my traditionally accepted studies, my older sister/teacher/self, and the life that I knew (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 *Browning, F. (date). Untitled painting of Alice, her sister, and the White Rabbit. Author's personal collection.*

Unlike Alice, I was older, wiser, and wary, anticipating what challenges might lie ahead. Part of me thought that chasing rabbits was nonsense, a waste of time, and was evidence that I was not taking life seriously enough grow in my career. I did not want to fall from the position I had fought so hard to achieve (a fallen woman? How deeply this

metaphor runs alongside the White Rabbit had yet to emerge). Another part of me knew that it was through creative expression and in following the white rabbit that I have historically come to know myself better. Here was my first paradox. “[O]nce down the rabbit hole (which Freud would call a “parapraxis”, an unconscious slip of the foot)...inversion is normal, logic has a completely different premise, and Alice, because she doesn’t understand any of this, is the only one in Wonderland who doesn’t make sense” (Cowan, 2002, p. 14). My highly logical, analytic persona, did not want to let go. Like Alice, I didn’t “want to go among mad people” (Carroll, 1865/1960, p. 89), not yet aware that I must be mad, to a certain degree, to even embark on the adventure itself.

I knew from Jung’s writings that “certain conscious contents must necessarily lose their energy...in order to make room for new contents” (Jung, 1961/1976, CW18, para. 458), but I was truly afraid. I was in transition again from student to young professional in mid-life, both exhausted from yet still craving the journey, restless yet somewhat lacking a sense of direction. Like Alice, when she loses sight of the White Rabbit in Wonderland, and asks the Cheshire Cat which way she should go, she is told it depends on where she wants to get to (Carroll, 1865/1960). I stumbled upon Jung’s musing of just this paradox, one of many in my revisiting of the White Rabbit:

It is perhaps a good idea to liberate man from all inhibitions and prejudices that hamper, torment, and disfigure him. But the question is less to liberate from something, than rather, as Nietzsche asked, to which end? In certain cases it looks as if in getting rid of one’s inhibitions and burdens, one had “thrown away one’s best.” Liberation can be a good or a very bad solution. It largely depends upon the choice of one’s further goal... (Jung, 1955/1976, CW18, para. 1454).

For Alice, and for me, the White Rabbit is not an object that can be grasped, but an evasive, “living symbol”. Jung stressed the necessity of encouraging the evocation of “living symbols that rise up from the creative unconscious...not of symbols that are dead and stiffened by dogma” (Jung, 1921/1971, p. 186). I knew, too, that it was “quite impossible to create a living symbol, i.e., one that is pregnant with meaning, from known associations (Jung, 1934/1971, par.816-817, p. 654). I had to trust in my knowing that Alice’s adventures were “just a dream”, that she was safe. Paradoxically, as a Jungian, I value dreams as “the royal road to... the unconscious” (Freud, 1900/1955, p. 604) and later learned that the rabbit deity, Michabo, in the Algonquin tribe, which I am connected to, is said to be both the creator and interpreter of dreams, master of symbology itself (Huffman, 2017). From a Native American perspective, the White Rabbit is able to hold this *tension of opposites* of both “the bringer of salvation” and being a “sinister rascal” (Kalff, 1957/2992, p. 22). I could only come to know the White Rabbit, and the message it had to teach me, by letting go and entering, again, into my own depths.

Engaging Associatively - Personal Process

I have been encouraged by some of my most trusted mentors in the sandplay community to amplify my symbol through free associative and creative writing, art making, and explorations of memory before delving into scholarly research. Floating back, psyche revealed the depth of the message that the White Rabbit has always been in my life.

The White Rabbit was there when I was born, and is there in the first photograph of me and my mother (Figure 5).



Figure 5 *Born with the White Rabbit. Photo of Author and Mother, taken by Father*

My mother bought a White Rabbit puppet when she was pregnant with me and used it as a focus object during her labor. I still have and cherish that puppet to this day. I had forgotten the photograph, though, and when I came upon it, found that it had

aged. It needed a bit of digital retouching, which I was glad to do, to preserve the memory and share again with my mother.

I remembered Easters and joyful celebrations as a child, wearing a white dress, clutching flowers, and being fanned by palms. I remembered being given and carrying a lucky rabbit's foot, which I now know has its own paradoxical traditions (Little, 2019); I can still recall the distinct smell, the feel of the soft fur and sharp claws, and a mix of excitement and unease. I remembered stealing away in libraries and sitting rooms to read *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Through the Looking Glass*, and floated back to how I still see it as an allegory for my life today.

I spent many hours in the early phases of my process looking at the White Rabbits in my collection, as well as drawing and sketching from memory and intuition. One image seems to question if the rabbit is digging down, teleporting, or incubating (Figure 6), while another, more abstracted version, appears to be gazing at the moon (Figure 7). In many Eastern cultures, they recognize the rabbit, not the man, in the moon, who is said to be creating the elixir of life (Figure 8).

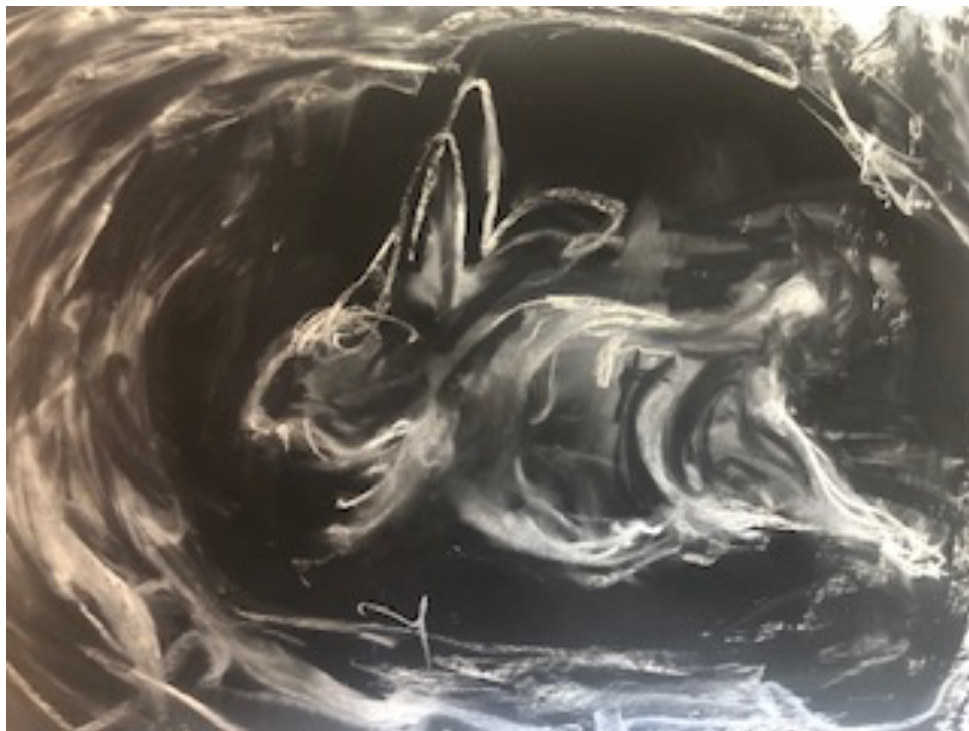


Figure 6 *McRoberts (2021). Down the Rabbit Hole. [Charcoal on paper].*



Figure 7 *McRoberts (2021). White Rabbit Gazing at the Moon. [Mixed media].*



Figure 8 ARAS. (2010, p. 289). *Rabbit on moon stirring the elixir of immortality.*
Embroidery, 18th century, China.

One day after a sandplay consultation session, while smoothing out a recently wetted tray a White Rabbit caught my eye from the shelves. I spontaneously created a scene (Figure 9), starting by digging down to the bottom of the tray, holding the White Rabbit in my hand. I placed a large, clear jewel at the bottom, and built up the opening with natural materials, somewhat covering it.



Figure 9 McRoberts (2021). *Following the White Rabbit*

Upon reflection, I recall lyrics from the movie *Labyrinth* (Henson, 1986),

But down in the underground

You'll find someone true

Down in the underground

A land serene

A crystal moon

The rabbit hole, a circle, may be seen as representation of a desire to delve into the depth of my unconscious, my femininity, to reclaim a sense of wholeness of Self, or literally crawl into a hole. It has been said, too, that “this concept of the Self as the

center is a defense against the chaos and nowhere-ness of psychic reality” (Cowan, 2002, p. 21). I placed the rabbit directly in front of me, at the front of the tray, about to jump in the hole. From the left, there is a large white mushroom and a stone cupid statue, pointing its arrow at the rabbit; while I recognize cupid as a messenger of love, I find him oddly threatening. On the right there is a reliquary with another stone child holding a vase, surrounded by flowers. I am reminded of a similar scene I created in previous trays, mourning a friend, and fearing my own mortality. In the top center I placed a jeweled tree. I remember smiling, thinking of a peer in the community who makes jeweled trees. She had recently written a piece in the newsletter about my work. I suddenly felt much less lonely in my process and renewed in my pursuit of the White Rabbit.

A Feminist, Psychodynamic View of the White Rabbit

The White Rabbit is an “extraordinary ancient archetype, stretching across diverse religions and cultures, many centuries and many thousands of miles” (Windling, 2020, no page number). The White Rabbit in the Alice books, specifically, may be observed as one who walks between the worlds and lures the sacred feminine into the unconscious to find her own adventure. The Alice books have long been observed as subversive political commentary, a satire of social graces, the education system, and positions of power (Lurie, 1990). Not only is the heroine a girl who escapes her studies, but she encounters many talking animals, suggesting that she is getting in touch with her wild urges and instinctive nature. By following the White Rabbit, she chooses to embrace falling into the abyss of questioning reality; perhaps it is her dream state that

allows this otherwise terrifying experience to be not only tolerable, but curious (Mayock, 2010).

The White Rabbit is an unyielding paradox, an androgenous force of creation, transformation, and the passage of time itself (Three Hares Project, 2019). The White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, is, ironically, perpetually late, or perhaps on “Oxford time”, used at Christ Church, where the author taught, which refers to the traditional practice of events running 5 minutes behind the scheduled hour (Steves, 2015). When the White Rabbit first runs by Alice:

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” (when she thought about it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet...(Carroll, 1865/1960, p. 25-26)

Perhaps, too, the White Rabbit’s obsession with time may be paralleled with my own fear of “running out of time” in midlife, looking back at the often mixed emotions of “being late” throughout the menstruating years, preparing for the end of sexual fertility, and not being sure of the expectations for the next phase of life. The White Rabbit works as a messenger for the Queen of Hearts in the Alice books. The Queen makes many illogical demands and is extremely hot tempered. There is no mention of a royal child, and her court is made up of a pack of cards. It is the White Rabbit that reminds the court that “there’s a great deal to come before” a verdict is made towards the end of the first book (Carroll, 1865/1960, p. 146); no real evidence had yet been presented. So, what may be in store?

Mid-Life

Carl Jung considered mid-life “a time of enormous psychological importance...the moment of greatest unfolding...[where] the real motivations are sought and real discoveries are made” (Jung, 1934/1954, CW 17, p. 193). This time in my life felt like some such great moment, and yet, while I had consciously chosen to turn towards the White Rabbit, I did not feel a spontaneous urge to chase, as a young Alice did. My conscious associations with my White Rabbit were ones from childhood, when I was more spontaneous and carefree. These memories and active imaginations were touched with nostalgia and a growing sadness. Slowly, though, I began to imagine myself as the White Rabbit, and the White Rabbit as a part of me, and together, I began to feel more integrated.

...with the onset of middle age there awakens ... a more insistent longing for that unity and undividedness which is especially necessary to him on account of his dissociated nature. At this juncture things are apt to occur that bring the conflict to a head. He becomes conscious of the fact that he is seeking completion, seeking the contentedness and undividedness that have always been lacking (Jung, 1934/1954, CW 17, p. 196).

Like a person at midlife, the White Rabbit midway through Alice in Wonderland goes through “a metamorphosis from a state in which...he is no longer a tool, but himself: a transformation of nature into culture, of instinct into spirit” (Jung, 1934/1954, CW 17, p. 197). To do this, especially as women, it is said we must go “under ground to find out who we are as women; self knowledge requires that we be psychologically subversive...’ (Cowan, 2002, p. 39).

Dora Kalff also developed sandplay therapy around mid-life (Kalff, 1966/2020). While she did not reference the White Rabbit in particular, she did write about the

transformation of the hare (Kalff, 1922/1957). While technically belonging to different species, the terms “rabbit” and “hare” have frequently been, and still often are, used interchangeably in science and myth (Smith, 2021). In the last 60 years, wild and domestic rabbit populations suffered a sharp decline due to hunting, habitat destruction and the emergent disease, but the popularity of keeping rabbits, especially White Rabbits, as exotic pets has increased (Esteves et al., 2018). Though White Rabbits are not considered rare in general today, because they are bred as pets and for scientific testing (The American Breeders Association, 2021), they have always been rare in the wild. Typically, wild rabbits and hares have a modeled brown coloring called *agouti*, which helps camouflage and protect them. In Eastern myths, it is said that in the middle of a hare’s life, they change color and become white; through this initiation they become a descendent, inhabitant, and messenger of the moon (Kalff, 1957/1992).

The Madonna/Whore Dichotomy

Like the moon, the rabbit has been long associated with the mysteries of creation, birth, and transformation. The Greeks considered rabbits to be symbols of love as well as the hunt, and used them as sacrificial offerings to the gods (see Figure 10).



Figure 10 *Creator Unknown (c. 400 BCE - 300 BCE). Figurine. [molded terracotta, pink and white slip]. Artemis with bow and rabbit. Retrieved from ARTSTOR, 2022.*

The belief that rabbits could reproduce as virgins persisted from the ancient Greeks until the medieval period, when the White Rabbit became an allegory of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception (Catholic Online, 2021; see Figure 11).



Figure 11 *Titian (c. 1525-1530). Madonna of the Rabbit*

White Rabbits, often laying or carrying eggs, are still seen in America in Spring, around the time of Easter, when the resurrection of the Christ is celebrated, and when rabbit breeding is most prolific. In this formation the White Rabbit can be viewed as a great magician, bestowing gifts and celebrating new life, but also acting in the roles of trickster, by hiding the eggs, and judge, by choosing who will receive these gifts and when. The rabbit burrow underground echoes the tomb of Christ, both transformational spaces. Mary Magdalene, who may be considered the shadow side of the Madonna, is said to be the first to become aware of Christ's resurrection from the tomb, and has been depicted holding a colored egg (Monastery Icons, 2022; see Figure 12).



Figure 12 *Saint Mary Magdalene & the Red Egg (Monastery Icons, 2022)*

Mary Magdalene was misrepresented as a repentant prostitute in sermons and writings for hundreds of years before being canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church in 1988 and being declared “Apostle of the apostles” in 2016 (Holy See Press Office, 2016). In the contemporary political lexicon, “chasing the white rabbit” is used to describe both the act of creating a cover story, and one’s wily fascination with discovering the truth (Urban Dictionary, 2021).

Interestingly, it is suspected that St. Mary’s Church in Yorkshire, England was the inspiration for Lewis Carroll’s White Rabbit (The Pilgrim Rabbit, 2021). On the north choir aisle there is a rabbit, called the Pilgrim Hare (Figure 13), donned in strikingly similar garb to the drawings by John Tenniel found in the Alice books (Figure 14).



Figure 13 *The Pilgrim Hare, St. Mary's Church, Yorkshire (The Pilgrim Rabbit, 2021).*



Figure 14 *Tenniel's White Rabbit*

Rabbits participating in human activities were frequent subjects in medieval art, known as “drolleries” or “grotesques” (Kern, 2016, Figure 15).



Figure 15 14th Century English Manuscript. *The World Upside Down*. [Drollery].

The Pilgrim Hare is called such because he appears dressed for a pilgrimage but has since become a destination for pilgrimage for Christians and fans of the Alice books alike. Notably, the heritage newsletter is called *The Pilgrim Rabbit* (2021), not the Pilgrim Hare, further confounding the two.

The Madonna-Whore dichotomy, defined as intrapsychic, polarized perceptions of women, and in this case, the White Rabbit, continues to be an area of religious and political discussion, clinical significance for both the sexes, and scientific inquiry (Bareket et al., 2018). The White Rabbit has been depicted as being present in the Garden of Eden during the temptation for knowledge (Figure 16).



Figure 16 *Duer, (1504). Adam and Eve (The Fall of Man). [Intaglio]. Retrieved from https://library.artstor.org/public/SS35538_35538_29885502*

The symbolism of the color white further amplifies other aspects of the rabbit in its duality (Stevens, 1998), especially at mid-life; white can be a symbol of both purity, surrender, and death of a previous life, such as a Western bride's wedding gown, or a flag waved for a truce in battle. Unfortunately, the White Rabbit has also become associated with far right political and Christian extremism, racism, and men's rights (O'Callaghan et al., 2015). I am reminded of how the White Rabbit in the Alice books

works as a messenger for the tyrannical Queen of Hearts who threatens to behead others for illogical reasons; her servants paint the white roses red for fear of her wrath.

Paradoxically, harkening back to virginal purity, the White Rabbit logo has also become synonymous with anti-establishment aims to end animal testing, especially in the “clean”, or natural, beauty industry (Free the Bunnies, 2021). Cosmetics have been used since ancient times around the world by both sexes with a range of symbolic significance. However, when the Alice books were written, natural beauty was idealized, and cosmetics were considered acceptable only for sex workers and actresses, professions of the lowest class (Jezernicky, 2017). Despite ongoing large-scale protests and waves of legislation, the use of White Rabbits in both toxicity and safety testing continues to increase (National Anti-Vivisection Society, 2021). There is “very little science” as to why rabbits are used save for their docile nature and lack of tear ducts which create ease of testing for prolonged exposure (HSI, 2013).

Jung (1961/1976, CW 18, par. 585) noted that our desire for scientific understanding has dehumanized us, causing emotional isolation; our intellectual “new world”, attempting to dominate nature (para. 597), brings with it spiritual suffering “because the helpful numina have fled ... disappeared underground into the unconscious” (para. 598). In the film *Us* (Peele, 2019), which artfully critiques the duality of social and scientific practices, perhaps specifically race and class relations in the U.S., the White Rabbit is a theme throughout, connecting “the Tethered” above and below; its ears resemble the scissors that are both the weapon of choice of the oppressed and perhaps a symbol of the dangers of cutting off one from the other (Miller, 2019; see Figure 17). The film suggests that while the rabbits are bred and eaten by those

underground, they may be connected (tethered) to those above; at the end of the film, rabbits can be seen above running free.



Figure 17 *Us* (Peele, 2019)

Kalff (1957/1992) remarked that the shift in storytelling from revering to killing hares parallels a shift in the spirit of the collective. “Kalff equates the death of the hare with the demise of a spirituality that is connected to nature...that we, in our time, are now seeking some resolution to this split between spirit and nature which began so many centuries ago” (Tatum, 1992, p. 12). Jung suggests we compensate for this loss by our work with symbols (1961/1976, CW 18, para. 586). Our “symbol-producing function...is an attempt to bring our original mind back to consciousness, where it has never been before, and where it has never undergone critical self-reflection. We *have been* that mind, but we have never *known* it. We got rid of it before understanding it” (Jung, 1961/1976, CW 18, para. 591).

Conclusion

Cultures around the world have told stories of these “paradoxical creatures: symbols of both cleverness and foolishness ...of rampant sexuality and virginal purity”, masculine and feminine energy at once, the “wily deceiver and sacred world creator rolled into one” (Windling, 2020) since the beginning of time. My process has seen me through to the start of a new adventure as a professor and empty-nester which brings with it a full range of emotions.

I hope that in contributing my tale of the White Rabbit, with a sense of renewal and regeneration through great transitions, I am aiding not only my own individuation process, but assisting others as well.

Jung recognized that the study of symbology, personal and collective is “an enormous task, and one that has not yet been mastered. But at last a beginning has been made” (Jung, 1961/1976, CW 18, par. 607). It was the White Rabbit that led me here. The White Rabbit is both “conservative and creative” and reminds us that “where we cannot hold paradox, we lose psyche” (Cowan, 2002, p. 6). I am no longer a babe in my mother’s arms, but I hold those moments within me. I will never again create another human body, but I will assist in the nurturing and development of their psyches. The White Rabbit continues to hold for me the ever-existing potentiality of the Self, a living symbol and life companion.

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Interested in all areas of the symbolic life, **Dr. Rachel McRoberts** professionally identifies as a Jungian oriented counselor, play therapist, educator, supervisor, and researcher. Her presentation and publication topics include creativity, sandplay therapy, adaptation to the digital age, as well as trauma informed- and spiritually integrated-practices. Originally from New York, where she experienced and studied the healing powers of art, she currently serves at the University of the Cumberlands in Kentucky and in private practice. She is the wife of an artist, the mother of two grown sons, and a co-traveler with many on the path of individuation.