



## Mini Review

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# Surrealism and Childhood-On the Mythological Child and Its Psychological Significances

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## Abstract

As artists, André Breton and Charles Baudelaire's takes on childhood are that it is a time frame of no worries and a time of convalescence; they allude to the experience of being a child again, and they do mean the actual child. As a psychologist, Jung looks at the child as one among the many archetypes of the collective consciousness and states clearly that this isn't about the child, but an archetypal form of a divine child/child god as seen in many mythologies. The child archetype symbolizes a "potential future". Jung coincides with Freud in alluding that this child archetype is rooted in an unconscious that becomes clear through conscious disruption. Nietzsche has an interesting metamorphosis in Thus Spoke Zarathustra where he posits the child as the 3rd and final stage of human development. Yet Nietzsche does not mean it in Breton or Baudelaire's sense. Nietzsche's "child" is a child of a particular archetype who has overcome the "camel" and the "lion"; it is by no means a child. Finally, a look at art historian David Hopkins's <Dark Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood> where he lays out the many contemporary adult projections of childhood surrealism art and their significance. The many instances in the book echo Jung's explication of how the child archetypes somehow are hardly about actual children. How we navigate those differentiations is inevitably critical.

**Keywords:** Surrealism; Psychoanalysis; Childhood; Archetypes

## Introduction

Surrealism and childhood have a vast similarity. The realm of the imagination seems to be intricately linked with the innocent, naive, and jovial nature of the child. André Breton writes "Children set off each day without a worry in the world" [1]. Baudelaire: "Now convalescence is like a return towards childhood" [2]. Yet the romanticism in the artists' musings is layered with either their own denser reflections on what this childhood means to the adult or clinal departures on this from art historians and psychologists. Breton indeed posits the relation between the "sleeping logicians, sleeping philosophers" [3] of the night and the Cartesian ones, despite his drunken praise of the former. Art historian David Hopkins terms the issue at hand to be a culture of childhood, signifying that much of surrealist representations relating to the child are projections of

the adult realities, and here questions arise on the child's activities, rights, and ethical concerns.

So where is the child's status in the bigger picture and how does childhood stand to surrealism? Because so much of the surrealist imagination is intertwined with the subconscious and the unconscious, it is handy to look at Jung's essays on the psychology of the child archetype, where Jung calls the child a "developing personality" and a "potential future" [4] along with magnifications the child as a sort of divine figure and neutralization of opposites, but the latter mythologies would remain obscure to the child themselves. In many mythologies, the child archetype is on the one hand a vulnerable figure, on the other hand possessing supernatural abilities. Their powers remain unknown to themselves because

they are often posited as the starting point of a journey, and only through conscious disruption, often some strange ending to the child, would bring things into perspective. What Jung argues here is the integration of the unconscious and the conscious, contrary to the split as seen in Breton's passionate manifesto where he judges the rationalists and the fathers of enlightenment-thought to be boring, and only that drunken state that Baudelaire also expresses is where happiness is.

From Jung's view, the symbol of the child god of a less linear world is a learned, laborious effort, one that only the adult can undertake in the bright daylight of conscious awareness, after all the endings of unconscious childhood playfulness. One is to be reminded of Nietzsche's three stages in life for self-overcoming in Thus Spoke Zarathustra: the camel, the lion, and the child. The child is, obviously, not our biological stage of youth, and in this sense nor a flighty process of "becoming", but a full-blooming realization of freedom for Nietzsche.

This freedom may correlate with how Breton and Baudelaire celebrates the carefree stage of the child, similar to Nietzsche's Dionysian side. But the fact that Nietzsche describes the camel and the lion before the child shows that this child of his imagination is a result of very different stages of being, and not just the real child who has not gone through a development. Nietzsche would describe the camel as the stage of bearing responsibility, the lion as the stage of courage to fight off the "dragon" of social norms, and the child as the final liberation [5].

Nietzsche's understanding of this child is an example of a deeper understanding of what childhood is: not a real child in the biological sense, who is actually vulnerable to all sorts of things, and also not the projection to the child as a state of joyous suspension, but a description of a state of sustained reflective apparatus that has also overcome reflection. Also, the surrealist realm of childhood may provide a few moments of reprieve into the underworld or the "ultra-world" or the universe, but they live along with their artists' adult psyches that are providing insights atop "the child" world, sometimes in clairvoyance, sometimes in perversion. Those projections have clinical significance about the artists' childhood experiences themselves, but not to actual children, who without influences hardly generate the level of either flamboyancy or grotesqueness in many surrealism arts. It is not necessarily true that the "child" is just more imaginative, and this could easily turn into a nostalgic fantasy to cover psychosis.

Thus, the child that Nietzsche presents, or the mythological child in Jung's archetypal analysis, is a third thing of a certain moral instruction of life, that does appear in some aspects of surrealism, while sometimes not at all. The distinction between those then becomes interesting as I will illustrate some instances of the contrasts between mythological children and actual children.

### Jung's extrapolation

Jung stated very clearly in his essay that "the mythological idea of the child is emphatically not a copy of the empirical child but a symbol clearly recognizable as such: it is a wonder child, begotten, born, and brought up in quite extraordinary circumstances, and not-this is the point-a human child" [6]. Those many examples

include Tom Thumb, a god, giant, animal metamorphosis, etc. The mythological child has three attributes: it is a potential future, it is vulnerable yet possessing divine power at the same time, and it has a quality of hermaphroditism.

All these qualities are associated with the children made divine in archetypal imaginations, they have significant clinical values and show the hidden wishes of collective unconscious, but they actually do not map onto actual children as much as it appears.

The child will indeed have a wider time span as growth as in the sense of having a "potential future", but the child themselves is unaware of this aspect. Children do not start planning their life at 5. The wonder at seeing the child as having so many time and future in front of them is a reflection on the child from the already aged, from the anxiety of realizing that life has passed in certain years. Thus the child is also a link to the past for the adult imagination. The future is thus seen as formidable because the child is in this sense the bearer of the unknown time ahead, a future that has already become concrete (thus devoid of other kinds of possibilities) for the adult, while the child has the potential to a future that has not started yet, the child is an inheritance to the horizon of possibilities, the child might do their future better than the adult. All those possibilities make the child seem divine in the moment of the adult's regret towards their own past. The positive aspect of this is that adults may be more attentive to what kinds of education and guidance they were to give to children, but this does not necessitate that a given child possesses some divine wisdom that is unknown to the adult: in fact, they may also grow to be regretting adults.

The only advantage the child has is that they have indeed not walked the path yet, not acted on an extended timeline yet, and the archetypal imagination here does help to situate the adult consciousness into re-connecting with a blank thus newer state, unburdened by mistakes already made and obligations of adulthood. It has that enlightening quality for the adult, but the child is actually at a stage where they are in embryo. They may have innocent exclamations and strong emotions as children, but they do not have a firm grasp onto whatever sustainable insight the adult imagines them to have.

The same issue applies to when in mythologies, children with divine powers often meet some unfortunate fate in the end of the story, and this signifies a clash between the conscious world and the unconscious realm. The child god is one of the archetypes of the heroes who go through a journey that faces challenges, a monster, go through an underworld, and emerge as someone who has overcome those in the end. Yet those heroes often then meet the end of their fate through some minor insignificance. The particularity of this has to do with that this god, in this case the child god, is from Jung's point of view, almost animal-like. We put heroes in stories on a high pedestal, but Jung is saying that the heroes are also not fully conscious humans yet.

The supernatural abilities that heroes have is a reflection of the collective unconscious's desire for such abilities, and when the heroes come out of the darkness that they defeated, the daylight is like an entrance into a far more "normal" world where the heroes are almost unsuitable now to be in. But here the significance lies

in how the hero, especially the child hero, serves as a tension point between the bleakness of the conscious world and the horror of the unconscious one. The background of the child hero story usually revolves around issues of abandonment, the loss of protection, danger, which are all prominent themes in the collective unconscious. Seeing a child hero going through a journey thus heightens the longing in human beings to defeat unwelcoming conditions even when at the most vulnerable stage of ourselves, besides the child being an initial stage of emergence from the safety net of the “mother”.

Yet in reality, most children do not have any means of protecting themselves against danger, and no one would advise them to voluntarily seek out danger. It is not that the children that had to go through harsh circumstances in their childhood cannot emerge as strong individuals, but their overall well-being are going to be inevitably affected. The child hero mythologies can strengthen human faith of overcoming the pain of life, but socially our ethics should illustrate the contrary, which is to create environments where children should not have to suffer.

Another quality of the mythological child that does not necessarily step on this dichotomy of the fears of the collective unconscious and the way it is evidently better for children’s well-being in reality, but may be a shared quality, is hermaphroditism, which means having the sexual characteristics from both male and female. I take that this reference makes sense when it is more about gender than sex which the child does have one assigned at birth. But regarding gender, the child has this quality of haven’t grown to an age to identify with a specific gender that obviously. This gives the child a distinct freedom that is both present in mythologies and in reality. They are, temporarily protected, from the sexual confusion in teenage years and early adulthood (or further on in life). Thus, their perspective centers more on what the adults around them do and say, rather than on the adults’ sexual dynamics with other adults. This makes the period of children’s education critical, because in their very strong unconscious impressions they have more space at this stage to just form ideas about their life and dreams, and even the general state of things between people.

Thus as the person grows older and more differentiated in sex, their ultimate longing is often to incorporate in themselves the qualities of the opposite sex. This implies that there is wisdom in being so, where they finally turn to a quality similar to the one in childhood again. In mythologies, the hermaphroditism or the androgyny of the child is a bridge between male and female, thus it is like a peacemaker and soothes conflict. It has a uniting force. This is also the function of the archetype where it has this elevating quality of being a mediator between the unconscious and the conscious world. But again, despite this quality’s similarity in reality and in mythologies, there is a sensitivity around how these kinds of discourses are wholly unknown to children. Despite how children show androgyny, they are unaware of how there is a split that is going to happen within nonetheless.

### **Surrealism childhood art and social issues**

In his book <Dart Toys: Surrealism and the Culture of Childhood>,

art historian David Hopkins details surrealism trends of the past around the topic of childhood and children’s toys. His analysis are bound up with the aesthetic, emotional, social, and ethical concerns in various angles. I categorized some of these themes as basically consisting of the following: what children in a normal childhood may indeed experience, things that happen to the child that linger in the minds of the adult artists, or adult themes expressed through a child narrative. I suggest that we are to discern those perspectives when looking at surrealism arts to understand what the artists are saying, because looking at art shouldn’t just be about identifying it with schools, thoughts, trends as generalizations, but to understand them psychologically.

Hopkins mentions that the way many children like to have toys and either take care of them, or toss them around, is because they believe that those toys have a “soul”. Children add this magical significance onto objects and see them as equally human. This is the starting point of many surrealism art where the boundary between living humans and inanimate objects become blurred. Partly this is due to in order to break out of established social norms, the human agent is unable to do it except either through putting on another personality (which is often schizophrenia in clinical diagnosis, but many take on more sublimated forms and become either actors or in this case surrealist artists), or putting this subjective wish onto another agent-a toy, in the case of childhood. The various forms, shapes, personalities that we see toys take on: animals, strangely dressed, different characters and flairs, etc, are all indicators of the human wish to see ourselves take on more possibilities. Toys can also represent other entities other than human-demons, spirits, angels, ghosts, mad-hats, talking rabbits, etc. And with those different kinds of toys they take on within them different entities, social orders, and interpersonal relations too, and we see these in fairytales most prominently.

Surrealism expresses this wish for possibilities, since what is “possible” is only evident by denying that there is only one manifestation of reality (or, one dogma). In this light surrealism actually takes on a very compassionate and tolerate tone in how it is willing to be open to these, yet there is also this seeming facade of it being a single strong wish to return to a certain period of time and against the formed, regulated adult world. Indeed those possibilities exist in a child’s mind. They see things differently, more originally.

This is the world of Breton and Baudelaire’s too, where the childhood world symbolizes a re-enchantment and nostalgia. Yet these emotions do not really refer to the real childhood or even a previous time in life, but referring back to the feeling that back then there were these other “possibilities” compared to present time, where now something has to be decided in a single accuracy and promptness. In reality, even then, even in that unstructured period of childhood, the child had to face each moment as they are, and soon becoming aware of the harsh conditions of the adult world. The preciousness of this sense of re-enchantment and nostalgia shows the desire to not be conditioned as one grows up to face a more conditioned world, but the paradox here is that children are often most vulnerable to prey and dogma despite their seeming freedom.

The favoring of childhood is not seeing the correlation between how as one grows in wisdom, so one has better ways to tackle the issue of bondage and freedom. The child actually does not know how to implement that consciously, despite when we look at how they play, they are doing it unconsciously. The child is also under the protection of their adult guardians who largely determines their fates, at least early on in life. So they don't have as much autonomy, only a certain feeling of being protected under the auspices of something more powerful, parents or guardians seen as near-gods. This produces a feeling of "surrender", thus living life with a flow, for the child or the childhood-longing artist, yet doesn't actually see how fragile that protection is, since their adult protectors are not actually gods.

Thus the way into childhood surrealism may potentially lead to a kind of escapism that freezes one in that time frame in life, which, despite its beauty, is quite a heavy veil. (This really coincides with how Jung talks about the end of the child hero's journey is exactly to not be a child anymore; yet this is not meant as a criticism for surrealism art that pivot to childhood here, only an attempt to delineate the differences in the artists' imaginations and the world that most children live in).

This leads me to mention a critical issue, especially in America, about potential themes of pedophilia and child abuse in surrealism arts. David Hopkins mentions that seeing this implication in certain surrealism art does not by any means imply the artist is such a person, and this we could all agree on. Yet there is a trend of what is termed "seductive child-oriented kitsch" in surrealism arts about childhood, where the art of the child takes on all forms of excessively-obvious adult clothing, makeup, and gesture. My pointing this out is not meant as a criticism on these arts necessarily, but to say that this reflects to us a problem that still exists quite prominently in society from adults whose mentality is at those kinds of places, potentially having been victims of child abuse. Whether psychoanalysis intersects with these or not generally depends on how the artists deal with their private lives themselves and that is not a concern hinged upon their public arts.

On a lighter note, there is a quite positive function in surrealism arts (except not necessarily directly relevant to childhood) between it and revolution: "presumably the two ideological poles of surrealism-dream and revolution (Freud and Marx)-are at stake in some way" [7]. The disruptive and transformative attributes of revolution sync with that of surrealism, but revolution also gives surrealism a more conscious, willful, and tighter spin. But this will require that surrealism also somewhat step out of its bounds to combine logic with its expansive imagination. "Revolution" is also

an idea similar to the "lion" stage of in Nietzsche's Zarathustra that I mentioned in the intro.

Lastly, what David Hopkins terms as "childhood beyond childhood" similarly summarizes what I want to say in this. He refers that to when looking at the adoption of a style of vulgarity in Abstract Expressionism, since by "vulgarity" it showed a contrary order to the usual world which in turn expressed a sense of utopia with different social and interpersonal relations [8]. It is a metaphysical reconsideration for a better, stranger world like that of childhood and its extension, thus "childhood beyond childhood".

## Conclusion

The foothold of my view here is that, just as Nietzsche's little analogy of that birth of a child-being after its camel and lion stage, this second childhood is also, in reality, un-childlike. It is an adult equipped with a child archetype, an adult who is capable of turning the imagination of the child into reality through endurance, courage, revolution, etc., to come to a confirmative "yea" for life. It is not just a vulnerable, hurt, and sentimental child, although that is part of the imaginative attractiveness of childhood. It is indeed a child that has at least in principle ended its hero journey.

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## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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