



A Plaything in its Plurality: Toys at the Borders of the Real and Unreal, the Temporal and Spatial

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Abstract

Toys have a dual nature: they apparently seem trivial, but they also happen to become objects of serious concern for adults too. This paper seeks to understand the dynamic of the bonding between a child and its plaything, taking into consideration Baudelaire's essay "The Philosophy of Toys". Toys have surfaced as important motifs and metaphors in several texts. The study seeks to uncover some of the contexts which have made 'toys' or a child's plaything a matter of perennial concern in the world of adults. Taking cue from Baudelaire's essay it looks at the dialectic between real and imaginary, in the perspective of a child as it begins to play with the miniature 'simulacra' of reality- presented through the characters of the Rabbit and the Skin Horse in the novella *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams.

Keywords: simulacra, emergent toys, good toys, bad toys, scientific toys

The word "toy" almost immediately associates itself with a feeling of something being light, trivial and out of context for the adult, real world of crisis and complication. Etymologically speaking, in the Middle Ages the word toy was used to denote an amorous plaything (c.1300) and later, a thing of little value, a trifle (1520s) before it came to define a thing for a child to play with in the 1580s. Regardless of the narrowly built concepts of the word, toys have never ceased to conjure up a phantasmagoria in our minds, both emotional and intellectual. The ever enchanting, ever alluring world of toys often becomes a timeless and space-less paradigm where the rationality and imagination of the adults and the children blend and

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clash. While narrating his experience in the toy chamber of Madame Panckoucke's house, in a 1983 essay, "A Philosophy of Toys", Charles Baudelaire explains how the intrusion of adult rationality upsets the fantastic world of children and their toys. Being asked to choose from an elaborate plethora of toys, as a gift from Madame Panckoucke, little Charles chose the most magnificent toy that his eyes could find, however, only to be discouraged by his mother for his "impertinent" choice. Consequently he had to settle down for the most ordinary object present in that room, with an endless fascination for the toys he could not choose, and "resigned . . . to a fair compromise" (Baudelaire 198).

Combined with the tripartite sensations of fantasy, pleasure and imitation, the toys stand in the threshold of being a child's need and luxury. Often perceived as trifles by many, toys still manage to attract the interest of adults, desire of a collector and curiosity of a historian. They are companions, far removed from the solemnity of existence. Yet, the pristine world of children and their toys are never bereft of adult interference. We may recall Louise de Vilmorin's¹ story from the Chapter, "The Nature of Toys", in *A History of Toys* about her little doll Lili in this context, where she ruminates on how she could not mourn the loss of her favourite doll Lili because of being restricted to do so by the insensible inhabitants of the grown up world. She calls the incident "the sort of dreadful infant tragedy" arising out of a conflict between "the involved passion of the child and the unthinking indifference of the adult" (Fraser 8). On the other hand we are also to keep in mind, those overprotective parents who do not let their children play with the new toy with the fear of it getting damaged in the unskilful hands of their children and consider toys to be objects of "mute adoration" (Baudelaire 202). Baudelaire is caustic about such parents and calls them "savage and parsimonious" (Baudelaire 202). This leads us to a paradox, if the loss of a doll is so trivial an issue that it needs not be mourned of, then why such precariousness to preserve such a thing that hardly makes a significant difference in our lives? Perhaps the adults intend to preserve the playthings as mementos of their children's growing years. Toys are companions, they represent life in full splendour to the little hearts with their "blinding flashes of colour . . . violence in gesture and decision of contour"

(Baudelaire 198). Attachment to a toy or a doll has always been a common aspect of growing up. Such attachment at times can be seen to have got extended till the youth or even beyond for many. There have been ample instances that talk about such involved attachment between the owner and the plaything across years and ages. The story of “Franz Kafka and the Doll”² has been interpreted and reinterpreted in so many ways that it had almost taken the shape of a legend with different meanings for different readers. The little girl’s grief, on losing her doll speaks volumes about the kind of camaraderie that she shared with her plaything, and despite the numerous interpretations, Kafka’s sincerity and response towards this apparently trivial incident remains most intriguing. Franz Kafka is known for his unique understanding and projection of the ideas of ‘absurdism’ and existential angst through his stories and novels. His sensitive mind provoked him to respond to the girl’s plight and comfort her. The letters that Kafka wrote on behalf of the lost doll who was apparently on a world tour, give a glimpse into the imaginative world of children surrounding their playthings. The toys are no less than companions to them who are capable of doing everything their human companions perform. Hence, for children a toy does not just remain as trivial and replaceable as it is thought of to be. The doll continued to remain a canvas through which the girl came to terms with certain truths of life.

According to Baudelaire, the “whole of life” is “to be found in miniature” (198) in toys. So, they also have this quality of make-believe, due to which children prefer to dwell in a world that is real yet preferable. According to Antonia Fraser in *The History of Toys*, “it is the importance of make-believe in toys which bridges the gap between the element of fantasy and imitation”. The semblance of reality in the better world of games and playthings perhaps provokes them to achieve a blending of fantasy and imitation in their act of playing. Thus, the child learns to come to terms with his immediate surrounding, and the toys become to him/her , as Baudelaire comments in his celebrated essay, “A Philosophy of Toys”, “actors in the great drama of life, reduced in size by the ‘camera obscura’ of their little brains” (198). Imitation becomes more meaningful to children when they deal with mechanical toys , because the child learns and starts expecting analogous experiences

when dealing with similar objects. Toys like mechanical cars, robots and trains thus become for a child the miniature models representing the real vehicles and scientific inventions of larger world. . Whatever he observes in his surroundings, he is able to reproduce that in his mechanical toys like cars, trains and boats. The child gets pleasantly surprised when he finds that he no longer has to drag a car across the floor, but it can move on its own and starts to learn demanding engines in every car because real cars have engines, “the desire, deliberation and action” working as a “single faculty” in his mind. The way a child plays with his toy gives “evidence of their great capacity for abstraction and high imaginative power” (198), according to Baudelaire. In the world of games sometimes the child creates a self sufficient universe where the toys no longer have roles to play even though their imagination has been catalysed by the toys to begin with. Baudelaire differentiates between the games borne out of the rich imagination of children and the games that are mere imitation by the child of the adult world. He categorically disapproves of such imitative games in which the child only seems to repeat the gestures and comments that they have seen their elders to perform. According to Baudelaire, by imitating the actions and behaviour of the adult, “the poor little things . . . are already giving a forecast of their immortal future puerility” (198). He marvels at the intensity of imagination of a child at play which makes the surrounding artefacts transcend their shape, size and organic unity. The furniture in rooms, become characters in the world of the child’s games. It is remarkable, how many roles a single chair can play continuously and repetitively in children’s games when they do not have any toy to match the requirement of the imagined game. In this sense the ‘plaything’ of a child continues to extend its meaning and significance continuously liberating the entities from their constricting existence. More than imitation, fantasy plays a crucial role in a child’s play.

Baudelaire states that toy is a child’s “earliest initiation to art, or rather for him it is the first concrete example of art” (199), which perhaps fails to evoke the same feelings of warmth , enthusiasm and conviction, as they grow up. In the course of playing the child continues a complex process of imitation and imagination. This is seen as their “great capacity for abstraction” (198) by Baudelaire,

by virtue of which they even develop the capacity of playing without any plaything at hand. Various great fictive narratives are created by the child as he/she starts imagining, and they not only create but live in those narratives while playing. Soon the immobile toy car covers huge distances with great speed, putting those audience to shame who demand a “physical and mechanical perfection” being unable to realise that the “plays of Shakespeare can remain beautiful with an apparatus of barbaric simplicity” (Baudelaire 199). Thus the toys become entities beyond the confinements of time and space. In the story “The Rocking Horse Winner” by D.H. Lawrence, the little boy is seen ferociously riding his rocking horse and imaginatively travelling to the race courses. The rocking horse might have been just a mute and stationed object, however, for the boy it becomes an essential agent – a companion in this fantastic journey to the race course. Other than the determination of a son to fulfil the wishes of his mother, what remains noteworthy in the story is the tremendous conviction the horse lends the child. The rocking horse not only inspires but aggravates the connection of telepathy between the child and his frequently visited race course. The rocking horse was an inseparable part of his intuition, as he says in the end, “I never told you, mother, that if I can ride my horse, and ‘get there’, then I’m absolutely sure – oh, absolutely!” (Lawrence 804).

There is a sensory appeal in toys that augment the imagination in children, soon they tend to look for an inner life force in them. While philosophising on toys and the act of playing, Baudelaire explains how there is the “overriding desire of most children to get at and ‘see the soul’ of their toys”, some after playing with it to the fullest and some right away after getting a toy in their hands. Question may arise, what constitutes the soul of a toy which the children are eager to witness? In other words, what is that which makes the toys so real to a child? Margery Williams in her story “The Velveteen Rabbit” tries to trace an answer to these questions through the narrative voice of a Velvet Rabbit and a Skin Horse; when the Rabbit asks the Skin Horse “What is REAL?”, the Skin Horse replies: “‘Real isn’t how you are made’, said the Skin Horse. ‘It’s a thing that happens to you. \When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you

become Real''' (Williams 4). In the course of elucidating the dynamics of becoming 'real', the Skin Horse explains how becoming real does not happen all at once:

You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. (5)

The explanation of the Skin Horse brings into our attention another important factor about toys, i.e. nostalgia, which works in tandem with imitation and fantasy. The charm and nostalgia surrounding it, keeps the worn out toy in the same place of significance to its owner however matured he might be. A neat illustration of such feelings is to be found in the extract from *Summoned By Bells*³ by John Betjeman who writes about his teddy bear Archibald Ormsbygore:

Archibald my safe old bear
Whose woollen eyes looked sad or glad at me.
Whose ample forehead I could wet with tears,
Whose half moon ears received my confidence,
Who made me laugh, who never let me down.
(Betjeman 4)

However, old and mended toys be, they become companions to a child. So the fantasy revolving around them never fade away, they remain as strong as ever.

Toys and playthings have found consistent attention in genre of Gothic fiction where we find the exploration of this relationship between a child and his/her favourite plaything. Toys with all their aesthetic appeal, and endearing, attractive appearance can still seem to evoke a sense of uneasiness upon the onlooker. The camaraderie between a plaything and its player has been much explored in the plots of many movies and stories that involve horror and the supernatural. The act of 'soul- searching' by a child into the

plaything as noted by Baudelaire perhaps finds an extension in such contexts of the horror movies. More often than not, the playthings are shown as conduits of supernatural power in the stories - who either return to avenge some wrong done towards them, or act as the agents of evil. It is very interesting to note how such movies have repetitively gained enough attention of the people to turn the individual storylines into series of movies, e.g.: *Poltergeist* (1982), *Child's Play* (1988), *Annabelle* (2014), *The Boy* (2016) to name a few.

According to Baudelaire, toys are the first emblems of art to a child. However primitive and simplistic a toy may be, it never fails to initiate imagination. Baudelaire asserts that there is no reason to think that the simpler toys create a lesser reality to children when compared to the elaborate toys they receive as New Year's gifts from their rich guests, who only attempt to impress their parents. The poor child's toy, Baudelaire argues is taken from life itself, because their parents cannot afford to spend money on toys. Citing an anecdote of a rich child ignoring his expensive doll only to marvel at the caged live rat kept as a toy by a poor child; he explains the fluid nature of toys that blur the fine lines between rich and poor, high and low: "But the child had no eyes for his toy; this is what he was looking at: on the other side of the grille . . . there was another child, dirty, somewhat puny . . . showing his toy to the rich child . . . teasing, rattling and shaking in a box with bars . . . a live rat! To save money his parents had taken the toy from life itself" (Baudelaire 200). Although Baudelaire's observation solely talks of the rat as a humble substitute for an expensive and richly designed doll, the creature certainly attracts the attention of the rich kid across the street for reasons more than this. As Baudelaire comments, it is a toy taken "from life itself", rather than a toy perhaps the rat is more attractive as a possible pet. Whatever the reason might be of the rich boy's greedy examination of the poor child's toy following the rejection of his "splendid doll", it is important to note how the playthings obliterate the class differences opening up the possibilities of a free exchange. Antonia Fraser in the book *A History of Toys*, talks about the study of Councillor Patrick Murray, The Museum of Childhood, Edinburgh- who had made a study of 'emergent toys', i.e. "the toys of poor children

which they have made themselves out of the material available”; one example of an emergent toy being a ‘shoe doll’ (Fraser 13). These toys bear testimony of the imagination and creativity of a child who creates them and plays with them. The humble and minimalist nature of such toys do not indicate that only the poor children like to play with these, but children of all class and background might find interest in these toys. Also such toys have a flexible nature, they have the freedom to get transformed into different forms and shapes owing to their simplistic nature of appearance.

Such investigation into the nature of toys and their effects on children prompts us to recall Dr. Harts’ explanation on good toys and bad toys, i.e. Good toys being those which stimulates the child’s imagination, augments his psychical development and makes him/her creative and the Bad toys being those which mainly satisfy the eyes and stand as a luxury in the child’s life. Such studies have already been made by great educationists like Friedrich Froebel, and Maria Montessori. Examples of ‘good toys’ might be building blocks, since they provoke children to create something new out of the pieces, but toys like a Victorian Doll’s house or a splendidly designed doll might not always inspire creativity in a child. They are complete and pleasing in one sense. Baudelaire in his essay makes a special mention of the scientific toys, like the Phenakistoscope, the Stereoscope etc which according to him, “develop in the childish brain a taste for the marvellous and unexpected effects” (201). Baudelaire calls these toys to be neither good, nor bad. However, the only defect that these toys have according to him, is that “they are expensive” (Baudelaire 201). Since not only do children dominate their toys but are often dominated by them for the toys are influential in shaping their dreams and fantasies; such distinctions become an important part of the discussion. Another crucial factor about toys is their universal nature. Toys are the artefacts that transcend the physical boundaries of countries and nations. According to Antonia Fraser in *A History of Toys*, “Again and again, the same basic pattern of toy emerges from among races which could not possibly have been in touch with each other’s cultures” (15). An example of a universal toy might be that of a rattle that is popular in all civilisations and cultures. Made

in a globular shape like that of a nut or a gourd, the rattle has been successful to fascinate infants and children across time and space. Fraser also discusses how certain toys disappear for some years and then are seen again in the old or a newer version. Despite the apparent dissimilarity between cultures and their symbolic representation reflected in the toys, there seems to be a pattern that unites the diverse nations in the framework of a plaything. Toys, are artefacts much humble in nature; each toy starts its journey with the stigma of being unimportant and trivial but in the course of their lives they fascinate, marvel and contribute to the cultural history along with performing the task of blurring boundaries. They are timeless, their nature being ever elusive.

End Notes

1. Louise de Vilморin was a French novelist, poet and journalist. Her reputation as a writer rests on the delicate yet sarcastic tales she had written. In the Chapter “The Nature of Toys” (*A History of Toys*), Antonia Fraser mentions Madame Vilморin’s anecdote to underline the extent to which toys remained important to their owners, despite all the aura of triviality surrounding it.
2. Borrowed from the blog, www.huffpost.com, “Kafka and the Doll: The Pervasiveness of Loss”, highlights the sensitive nature of Kafka and conveys some truths about life with simplicity. The story has been told and retold in various contexts and there is more than one version of it. The reference found in this source narrates that Kafka had continued to write letters to the girl whom he found in the park, on behalf of her lost doll. Then finally Kafka gifted a new doll to the girl which inadvertently looked different from her own doll that she had lost. She found a note with the doll that said that the world tour had changed her. Years later when the girl had grown up, she found another note in one of the hidden crevices of the doll that said that the objects of love always return to us, although changed or in a different form.

3. *Summoned by Bells* by John Betjeman is an autobiography in blank verse. The author describes his memories of his home in London to his departure to Oxford. The autobiography mentions his Teddy Bear whom he called by the name Archibald Ormsbygore. Archibald remained a companion to Betjeman till his old age. Antonia Fraser mentions him in *A History of Toys* to talk about the relationship that Betjeman shared with his favourite toy.

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