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Between Imagination and Reality: Imaginary Companions In Childhood

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Abstract

This paper first explains the prevalence of imaginary companions among children in the real world, then introduces the sources, characteristics, and psychological causes of imaginary companions, and clarifies that imaginary companions are created at the initiative of children, who can distinguish fantasy from reality. The book *The Little Princess* is then used as an example to analyze the representation of imaginary companions in children's literature. Then the author presents the psychological dilemma of children facing family reorganization in comic language based on the psychological phenomenon of imaginary companions.

BETWEEN IMAGINATION AND REALITY:

IMAGINARY COMPANIONS IN CHILDHOOD

by

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1. Introduction

My hometown was not the safest place in the world, nor was the turn of the century in China the calmest period. Growing up, I was warned that outside my home and school, there were kidnappers who would grab you into a white van and take you away, wild dogs who would give you rabies if they bit you, and homeless people who lived under overpasses and were mentally disturbed. One of my parents was a teacher, and one was a doctor, and they worked a lot. When school was out and they were at work, sometimes they didn't feel comfortable with a little kid like me running around outside, so they would lock me in the house.

At one point in my childhood, all I had was the two-room apartment of our home, and burned into my mind was the world I saw through the windows, balconies, and doors, the world my parents described as scary and unsettling—and my increasingly wild imagination, nurtured by books and television. I would stare out the window of my apartment and imagine the secrets behind their curtains, I would talk to the female phantom on the ceiling playing with marbles, I would imagine myself climbing over the railing and down the security fence off the fifth floor, and I would peer nervously through the peephole at every footstep coming from the hallway. Maybe it was because I was terrified by my parents' warnings, or maybe I was really expecting some weirdo to knock on my door. Oh, how I wanted a little something to happen in my life back then, even if it was dangerous!

Much later, when I grew up, I read books and newspapers, I learned about the concept of "latchkey child", I learned about the turbulent social environment of the nineties, I

understood my parents' worries, and I realized that my fantasy of the woman's voice on the ceiling was not strange, just an" imaginary companion" that everyone has. I realized it was a child trapped at home, overcoming loneliness with wild fantasies and exploring the edges of childhood. And that's the story I'm going to tell, back to turn-of-the-century China, in a 65-page comic about a child left alone at home by his mother, a special time of experiencing family changes, and a fantasy.

2. Imaginary Companions in Real Life

2.1. Imagining friends is very common in childhood

Having imaginary companions during childhood is an experience shared by many children. Dorothy Singer and Jerome L. Singer were pioneers in the study of imaginative play. In their book *The House of make-Believe: Children's Play and the Developing Imagination* published in 1990, they found out that 65% of children had imaginary companions [14]. Marjorie Taylor is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Oregon and author of the book *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create them*. Her main research interests are in the development of imagination and creativity. In 1997, she and Stephanie M. Carlson interviewed 152 children aged 3-4 years with their parents, of whom 27% had imaginary companions [16]. A few years later, they followed up with the children they had previously interviewed and found that by the age of 6 or 7, about 50% of the children reported having had imaginary companions, and 31% still had imaginary companions at the time [18]. Pearson in the U.K., on the other hand, interviewed 1800 randomly selected children aged 5-12 years and found that about 46% reported having had imaginary companions, with 50% of

children aged 5 to 9 years having had imaginary companions and 35-40% having imaginary companions at that time. However, from the age of 10 years, the proportion reporting having imaginary companions now was half as many as at age 9, dropping to 19%, after which the ratio then drops significantly as the child gets older, and by age 12, just 9% of children report having imaginary companions now, as shown in Figure 1. Age distribution of children who reported past or present experiences of an imaginary companion

So, we can see that almost half of all children, at one time or another, have had the experience of playing with imaginary companions during their childhood, at ages as young as three years old and as old as 18 years old [13]. Still, the most active period for imaginary companions is when children are 5 to 9 years old.

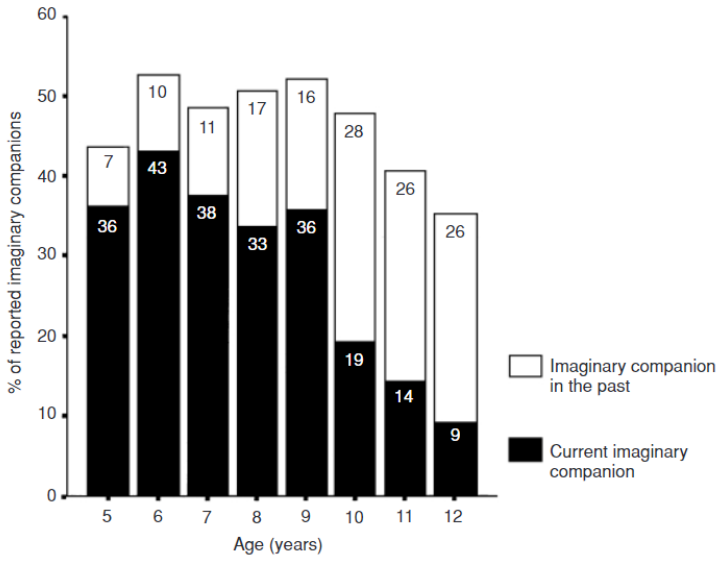

Figure 1. Age distribution of children who reported past or present experiences of an imaginary companion[12]

This rate may make many people feel surprised and even scared. Because when it comes to imaginary companions, due to the influence of modern entertainment, the image that

appears in many people's minds is no different from a horror story: a child creates out of thin air an only-he-knows, mysterious, and invisible little creepy human companion, which usually indicates that the child has special abilities, or mental disorders, resulting in their inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. In fact, imaginary companions do not exist in the way one might think.

2.2. Imaginary companions come from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms

Imaginary companions with whom children establish friendships do not have to be illusory.

In Mauro's interviews with children's imaginary companions, 39% of the children who responded that they had imaginary companions relied on physical dolls or stuffed toys to embody them.[11]. Even without toy prototypes, children draw from various events to construct their imagination. Some children adapt the characters they see on T.V. as their friends; for example, Hoff's study mentions a child who saw *Gremlin* and was so attracted to the drinking and playing gremlins in the movie that on a lonely, frightening night when he could not sleep, he created a character named Salt and Pepper to keep him company [7]. Some children will use people they know in reality as prototypes for imaginary companions, such as smaller versions of real friends or spirits of deceased relatives, others will adapt animals they meet in their lives as components of their imaginary companions, and some children construct imaginary companions with their own features; they will imagine that the other party has the same hair and the same preferences as they do [10].

Whether imaginary friends with realistic prototypes are considered imaginary friends is a controversial topic. Taking plush toys as an example, admittedly, in some children's imaginations, their imaginary companion is equivalent to the prototype, such as Stanley, the boy introduced in Carter's study [4]: Stanley's imaginary companion was a beloved Lego pirate figure. He always wanted to be close to his friend, so he carried the pirate figure around even in P.E. class by stuffing it inside a P.E. pump. For Stanley, the toy exists, then the friend exists, the toy disappears, then the friend disappears. For some children, however, there is a parallel between the physical toy and the toy-based imaginary companion: for example, Lynn, the young girl introduced by Benson in his study [2], had an imaginary companion named Nosey, who was described by Lynn as a large dog wearing an apron, walking on his hind legs, four or five feet tall, and a cat who also walked on his hind legs. Lynn's description of Nosey was apparently very similar to the appearance of a stuffed dog she owned. Still, she gave Nosey the impossibly large size of a stuffed animal and a cat companion without the toy prototype. At the same time, Nosey's appearance and disappearance were parallel to that of the plush dog as a prototype: the dog was a gift to Lynn when she was less than one year old and remained with Lynn until she was nine years old, while Nosey first appeared in Lynn's mind when she was three years old and left Lynn with his cat companion when he was four years old on a trip to visit his grandparents. Lynn's example illustrates that in the process of constructing imaginary companions, children actively use their imagination to modify the form of the prototype in reality, and its state of existence is not quite the same as that of the prototype. Thus, imaginary companions with actual prototypes are like fictional characters based on real people, and their fictional nature is unquestionable.

Because of the variety of sources, the forms of imaginary companions naturally vary. I have extracted from the studies of many researchers some of the children's descriptions of their imaginary companions, as in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptions of imaginary companions[16][10][2]

Bobo	a monkey who plays hide-and-seek and sometimes messes up the bed
Joshua	a possum who lives in San Francisco
The Girl	a 4-year-old girl who is "a beautiful person" and "wears pink all the time"
Baintor	an invisible boy who "lives in the light"; you can't see him because he is white
Hekka	a 3-year-old invisible boy who is very small but "talks so much" and is "mean" sometimes
Derek	a 91-year-old man who is only 2 feet tall but can "hit bears"
Nobby	an invisible 160-year-old businessman
Ronzar	an extraterrestrial creature as spots of light and appeared to be of an advanced civilization

As we can see from the table, children's imaginary companions come in many different forms. In terms of external expression, imaginary companions can be humans, animals, the opposite sex, the same sex, a child, an adult, or even a mysterious creature from an alien world with no physical presence.

Imaginary companions can also establish many kinds of relationships with children. An imaginary companion can be a child's idol, able to do many things that the child himself cannot do. For example, a girl who is unpopular in the family because her mother wanted a boy created in her imagination two intelligent and clever brothers who could meet her mother's expectations [1], or a boy who enthusiastically described Christian the Monster Magician in his mind who could grow the world's tallest stilts from his feet[6]. Imaginary companions can also be protégés of children, in need of their care and education, as Bander records with the girl, who created a very needy baby in her fantasy. She felt it was her duty to take the baby out to play and bathe and wipe it[14]. Imaginary companions sometimes appear as enemy figures: Marjorie recounts the story of a mother whose 3-year-old son used to beg her to check his closet before bedtime because of a scary black-bearded man, "Barnaby," hiding in the closet. This imaginary threat, "Barnaby," even followed the mother and son on a flight[15]. Bender's records include a boy named Arnold, who created a brother Louis in his imagination, saying that Louis was like the devil, so he would kick and beat Louis and put Louis to prison[1].

However, many researchers agree that these different imaginary companions have a common reason for their appearance, which is to satisfy the child's psychological needs at a specific time.

2.3. Imagining friends meet the psychological needs of children

2.3.1. Relieving loneliness, isolation

Various researchers have mentioned in their interviews and notes with children that loneliness is the number one reason for the emergence of imaginary companions.

In Benson's tudy, Simon, a 14-year-old boy, was born into a lonely family; his mother died in a car accident when he was ten years old, and his father was in the Navy and often had to be away from home "on orders". When he was seven years old, a young girlfriend left him for other boys, and just when he decided that he was a very lonely young man, his imaginary companion Ronzar from an advanced outer space civilization appeared to him [2].

In Bender's study, Charles, a 7-year-old boy, whose brother died early, whose father abandoned the family, and whose mother worked outside the home and neglected him, describes that when he was "very lonely", his imaginary brother John and sister Mary came to him and played games with him. He said, "They are a great comfort to me when I am all alone."[1]

In Hoff's study, the boy Rasmus talked about his imaginary companions Salt and Pepper, mentioning that he usually spoke to his Gremlin friends when he was depressed and alone at home. "But you feel you are not completely alone anymore when they come along," said Rasmus[7].

2.3.2. Helping children solve life's problems

In some cases, the imaginary companion acts as a mentor and coach to support the children in the difficult situations they encounter in life

Simon attributed his ability to get A's and A+'s in science and math classes to the support of his alien friend Ronzar[2]; Saga said that when she sang in the choir, her imaginary friend would be there to prompt her when she did not have the confidence to sing correctly despite having the music sheet in her hand. "And then, you see, I had papers and all. But I

suppose that I couldn't read very well [. . .] And you could, when they stood there and sang, sort of, they whispered the words to you and that way you knew," said Saga[7].

Imaginary companions not only help children with schoolwork but also admonish them on morality and behavior. Charles, the boy mentioned above, also reported that his imaginary older siblings would admonish him not to be a bad boy: "They would ask why I have been bad all the time. They say if I will be bad all the time and never good, they won't come again."[1]

There are also times when imaginary companions can help children build up the courage to rebel against their parents when facing pressure. For example, when Harriet talked about stealing chocolate at Christmas, she blamed it on the urging of her imaginary friend Christina [7]. She gained the courage to break the rule she was afraid to break, along with the urging of her imaginary friend.

2.3.3. Venting resentment and discontent

Because imaginary companions are fictional, very often, imaginary companions also become a safe outlet for children to vent their resentment and discontent that they have no way of venting in real life.

When the boy John described how he got along with his imaginary friend Tom, he mentioned that when he was angry, he would pretend that his pillow was Tom, and then he would hit the pillow (Tom) and "make the pillow jump"[10].

By giving this imaginary brother the same name "Louis" as his father, Arnold's imaginary friend became a stand-in for his feelings toward his father, and kicking and punching Louis became a safe form of venting his resentment toward his father [1].

This method could not only be applied to the resentment directed at others, but also to the resentment directed at children themselves. In the records of many researchers, we can see that children externalize their own defects to imaginary companions to rationalize their dissatisfaction with themselves.

For example, Clara, a timid girl, created her awkward imaginary sister Mary and scolded her unmercifully[1]. Rasmus was doing the same thing, a boy who himself was a marginal child who lacked friends at school, yet planted his nervous and shy qualities into Salt and Pepper. He complained that they "don't dare to take the first step"[7]. By transferring their flaws to their imaginary companions and chastising them, Rasmus and Clara were able to express their guilt over their faults safely.

2.4. Children can distinguish between reality and fantasy

Imaginary companions are not always subordinate to the imagination of their creators, the children.

Sometimes they can demonstrate a very independent character and volition, not just following the orders; for example, when Ida mentioned her imaginary friend Knubbis from an alien planet, she stated that Knubbis was able to tell her things that she did not understand, such as what the planet where Knubbis used to live was like [8], and Holly's imaginary pony, too,

did not always obey her will[10]. And when George described his imaginary monkey playmate, he also said, “He is disobeying me all the time” [1].

Sometimes children develop very strong emotional connections with their imaginary companions, for example, Simon mentioned with great sadness in the hospital that Ronzar and Venus had been killed by a meteorite. Given his lonely and unsupportive environment, and the appearance of a new imaginary friend, “Courco,” soon after, it is hard to believe that the deaths of Ronzar and Venus were due to Simon’s wishes. Simon also showed intense sadness after the departure of his imaginary friends, even stating that he could not live without them [2].

Imaginary companions may have their origin in reality, have independent personalities, serve actual purposes, and create genuine emotional connections with children; from these many perspectives, imaginary companions are real enough to rival human friends. This raises the worrying question, do children confuse fantasy with reality?

A 1999 study showed that in most cases, parents of young children knew that they had imaginary companions, whereas, by age 6-7, only 20% of children’s parents knew about the existence of their imaginary companions[18]. Hoff’s study indicated that children who still had imaginary companions at age 10 showed significant embarrassment when talking about them. Dora only played with her imaginary friends in the bathroom because she thought that if her family found out that she had imaginary friends, she would be embarrassed. Tara, when asked why her imaginary friends were not known to outsiders, confessed that she was afraid that people would think she was weird, and Carmel also stated that she would wait until she was home alone to interact with her imaginary friend[10]. This phenomenon may be explained by the

fact that as children grow older and more mature, their distinction between illusion and reality becomes clearer, and they become ashamed to confess the existence of their imaginary companions to outsiders.

The autonomy of imaginary companions is probably due to the child's desire to have a friend who is "independent of her own will," as Holly said of her disobedient imaginary pony: "When I am riding, I do not want her to do exactly what I say."[10] In fact, among the functions of imaginary companions described above, the function of "venting discontent" is also based on the child's knowledge that the imaginary companion is not real. In 1993, Taylor et al. found that even at a young age, children have sufficient discriminatory ability to judge the reality and falsity of their imaginary companions. They are aware of the fictional nature of their imaginary companions and can clearly distinguish between fantasy and reality[17].

3. Imaginary companions in literature, with *A Little Princess* as an Example

A Little Princess is a children's book by Frances Hodgson Burnett. In the story, our little heroine Sara was the daughter of a wealthy family and the little princess of a boarding school. But after the death of her father, she loses her only family and her fortune. Unable to pay her school fees, Sara is reduced to being a school maid, starving, and without clothes. The only thing she has is her imagination. She uses her imagination to divert her attention: by imagining rats as neighbors and the dolls as friends, she puts a rose-colored veil on her miserable life and gives herself the strength to persevere in her difficulties.

This story, written in 1905, has limitations brought about by the times in terms of values and characterization, but just as this story faithfully reflects the social concepts of 1905, the depiction of imaginary companions as children in this story is also very faithful and accurate.

Sara had at least three characters/groups available to her as imaginary companions in this book. The first is Emily the doll, the second is a family of rats who lived inside the walls, and the third is a family of ten who lived near the school.

Just like real-life imaginary companions, Sara's three groups of imaginary companions come from different sources, based on toys, animals, and imaginary versions of real people, and all, to varying degrees, meet Sara's psychological needs at the time: the doll Emily is a gift from Sara's father, Captain Crewe, to his daughter before his departure. The personification of Emily as her friend is Sara's solace for the loneliness of having her only family member leave. The rats inside the walls, which Sara encountered when she moved into the dirty attic after not being able to pay her tuition, were originally a representation of Sara's miserable life, but naming the rat family after a human name Melchisedec allowed the rats to become "just like a person" and "as polite as we are", which makes it possible for Sara to overcome her fears and co-exist with the rat and the difficult living environment those rats represent:

> *"Some people are afraid of them," said Sara. "I was at first—but I am not now."* [3]

Imagining the family of ten next to the school as "The Large Family" occurs when her father dies and Sara is used as a maid by Miss Minchin, reflecting Sara's longing for the warmth of a family. Although all three sets of imaginary companions are important to Sara in different ways, I will focus on Emily the doll in the following analysis, because this doll, as an imaginary

companion, accompanied Sara from the age of 7 to 11 and experienced the most changes in Sara's mind.

Emily was a gift to Sara from Captain Crewe before he left London for India. With her only relative, her father, about to leave her, Sara would enter boarding school alone. Waiting for her at the boarding school, however, were unfriendly classmates, and a snobbish school principal. What a new and dangerous environment for a seven-year-old girl! And remember, the story happened in 1905; there were no cell phones, only slow communication by mail. The doll was the only link between her father and herself. Naturally, treating the doll as a friend and talking to it is the best solace for Sara's solitude and anxiety, as Sara herself, said in the book:

> *"We must be very great friends to each other and tell each other things. Emily, look at me. You have the nicest eyes I ever saw—but I wish you could speak."* [3]

In learning the sad news of her father's death, Sara first source of comfort is also her doll Emily:

> *Once she stopped before Emily, who sat watching her from her chair, and cried out wildly, "Emily! Do you hear? Do you hear—papa is dead? He is dead in India—thousands of miles away."* [3]

When Miss Minchin gets angry with her, stripping her of all her privileges and verbally abusing her, Sara is calm on the surface but clings to Emily, who is always there for Sara through all the hardships she goes through:

> *She went up the stairs slowly, but panting for breath and she held Emily tightly against her side.* [3]

Sara treated Emily with the utmost respect. From the first time she saw Emily, the doll of her dreams, in the store, she talked about Emily not as a toy to be treated casually, but as a friend who was equal to her and her father, who needed to be treated with courtesy:

> *"Dear me," said Captain Crewe, "I feel as if we ought to have someone to introduce us."* [3]
>
> *"You must introduce me and I will introduce you," said Sara.*

and who was sufficiently intellectual to read and think:

> *…she went to Emily, who sat in a chair of her own, and gave her a book.*
>
> *"You can read that while I am downstairs," she said…*[3]

Emily was so human to Sara that in her pretend play with Lottie, a tiny little girl in Miss Minchin's boarding school, Sara went even further: When Lottie cried out for her mother, Sara proposed to be Lottie's mother to take care of her and Emily to be Lottie's sister, which indicates further that in Sara's eyes, the doll Emily was not only at the same level of status and knowledge, comparable to humans like herself and Lottie, but even equivalent in the physical sense to blood ties.

But this does not mean that Sara was crazy, or that she had any mental problems. There is evidence in the book that Sara had actively and consciously chosen Emily to be her imaginary companion from the very beginning. Here is an example:

> *"She is a doll I haven't got yet…I have called her Emily. She is going to be my friend when papa is gone. I want her to talk to about him."* [3]

Sara's words and actions suggest that the personification of Emily was entire of Sara's own volition and that Sara knew very clearly that Emily was not human, but that she was

pretending to believe that a doll was a companion that could think and listen like a human being out of her desire.

In the way Sara treated Emily, there is also much evidence that Sara was able to actively distinguish between the imaginary and the real. For example, in the description of Sara's conversation with Emily, Sara mentions "I wish you (Emily) could speak" several times, knowing very well that Emily cannot express her own opinion and can only accept Sara's one-sided confession. When she introduced Emily to Ermengarde, her little real-life friend in the boarding school, she acted as if Emily would secretly drink tea, read, and walk around when no one could see her, and when she saw Emily's motionlessness (which is the natural form of a doll) she automatically constructed an explanation that fit her imagination of Emily: "Oh, she got back to her seat before we could see her! ", as if she really believed her own fabricated story that Emily could really move freely as a human. In the very next paragraph, Sara confesses to Ermengarde that she is just "PRETEND I believe she can ". Sara fully realized that Emily was just a fictional companion that she had created in her mind to satisfy her need for mental solutions to her dilemma.

The abandonment of the imaginary companion occurred when Emily's presence no longer met Sara's mental needs. As I mentioned at the beginning, imaginary companions usually appear between the ages of 5 and 9 for children, with reports of imaginary companions tapering off after the age of 9. In the book we can also see that on the eve of her 11th birthday, in a letter to her father, Sara expressed her desire to say goodbye to the company of dolls (imaginary companions):

> *"I am getting very old," she wrote; "you see, I shall never live to have another doll given me. This will be my last doll…."*[3]

The relationship between the child and the imaginary friend changes when the hardships in life gradually increase beyond the ability of the imaginary friend to provide emotional support to the child. Thus we see Sara, abused as a maid, angrily tearing off Emily's mask after a long, painful, lonely day:

> *"You are nothing but a DOLL!" she cried. "Nothing but a doll—doll—doll! You care for nothing. You are stuffed with sawdust. You never had a heart. Nothing could ever make you feel. You are a DOLL!"* [3]

She openly ripped apart her fantasy, painfully admitting that the beautiful doll was not a friend who could help her.

However, this does not mean that she abandoned her imaginary companion because she was still in a difficult situation that the child could not solve with her abilities. There are two components to an imaginary friend: Because it is a "friend", it can provide the child with companionship and support in every way; and because it is "imaginary", it gives the child a safe outlet for dissatisfaction and rage that has nowhere else to go. Sara, a child who knew how to behave, was obedient and precocious. She was respectful to her teachers, gentle to her friends, always maintained a noble posture and good upbringing, and she would never be able to make such rude actions as pushing, and shoving to her real friends. At this point, Emily, whose humanity did not really exist, was the best object for her to vent her frustration. Emily was just a doll, not able to cry, not able to hurt, so Sara could treat Emily freely without any punishment or any negative consequences.

In summary, we can see that at different moments of Sara's childhood, with the doll Emily as her imaginary friend, when she faced her unsolvable dilemma, met her psychological needs at different stages, and was an important and indispensable partner for Sara. But by the end of the story, when Sara is adopted by her deceased father's friend and lives a rich and happy life again, every one of Sara's real friends is more or less accounted for by the author in the book, while Emily the doll, the important companion who accompanied Sara through her most difficult moments, is almost forgotten by Sara and the author.

This is the task of the imaginary companion indeed: when the child is in trouble, it is the child's emotional support, and when the child is out of trouble and can solve the problems of life with their own ability, the imaginary companion has completed their work.

4. *Mirage*, an attempt to interpret imaginary companions

My visual thesis is a 65-page short comic based on the aforementioned psychological phenomenon of imaginary friends. The story is about a boy from a single-parent family locked in his home alone while his mother was away from work. Lonely and isolated, when a mysterious strange man knocks on his door, he overcame his fear and established a friendship with the strange man through the iron-barred door. Finally, one day, he couldn't resist his curiosity and defied his mother's advice not to open the door to strangers. He unlocked the iron door to go out and play with the man under the man's persuasion when his mother suddenly returned home and bumped into the scene. And at this point, the suspense comes to a climax: what happens when the stern, worried mother finds her rebellious son in contact with the dangerous man outside the door?

It was the first time the mother intervened in the friendship between her son and the strange man, and only then was the truth revealed: the mysterious visitor was just the boy's imagination, and was, in reality, just a stray dog who came to the door for food.

4.1. The multiple roles of the imaginary companion

In this story, I deliberately designed the four main characters that appear in it—the boy, the boy's mother, the dog man, and the mother's boyfriend—as anonymous. The reader is only vaguely aware that the boy was a shy boy of about five (the age when imaginary companions are common), the mother was a stern woman who works in a hospital, the father was absent, and the mother had a rascally-looking boyfriend. Without knowing the names and specific information about the characters, the characters are generalized, so that the focus of the story naturally falls on the psychological changes of the boy.

The dog man, like all other imaginary companions, is closely related to the psychological dilemma faced by the boy. The author of *A Little Princess* chose to use multiple imaginary companions to meet the psychological desires of the protagonist in all aspects, but I want to reflect on the various levels of the protagonist's psychology through one imaginary companion in different stages of different aspects. There are three main aspects of the dog man's image in this story.

The general background of the story is the turbulent environment of the times. I use the room furnishings to suggest the background of the era. Red wooden sofas, iron bar exterior doors and wooden interior doors, peony embroidery as wall decorations, and glass vanity tops are all common furnishings in turn-of-the-20th-century Chinese homes.

Figure 2. The front door of the boy's home

Figure 3. A photo of typical door of Chinese apartment in 2008

In China in the late 20th century, during the period of reform and opening up in full swing, the social order was in turmoil. The cases of abduction and trafficking of women and children increased rapidly between 1974 and 1987, reaching a peak between 1988 and 2001, and in 2000, the prosecutors prosecuted 14,000 crimes of abduction and trafficking of women and children, among which the majority of abducted children were boys because of the Chinese culture's tradition of giving preference to boys over girls[9][19]. The boy's mother's warning to him in the flashback at the beginning of the story—that if he did not behave, a tramp would abduct him—was the most common warning parents gave to their children during that period. When parents took their children out, they held their children's hands tightly so that they would not get lost and be targeted by traffickers and sold elsewhere. And it is this social environment and the mother's warning that planted the seeds of fear and anxiety in the heart of the little boy, the protagonist. So, the dog man's first appearance was in front of the boy in an almost inhuman and horribly distorted image, as you can see in Figure 4. First appearance of the dog man.

Figure 4. First appearance of the dog man

After the young boy, in his panic, associated the stray dog outside the door in his panic with the image of the tramp that his mother used to terrorize him, the young boy then incorporated the image of the tramp into the image of the dog man (Figure 5. The dog man wearing the same clothing as the homeless man). At this stage, the image of the dog man is the threat that the boy faces.

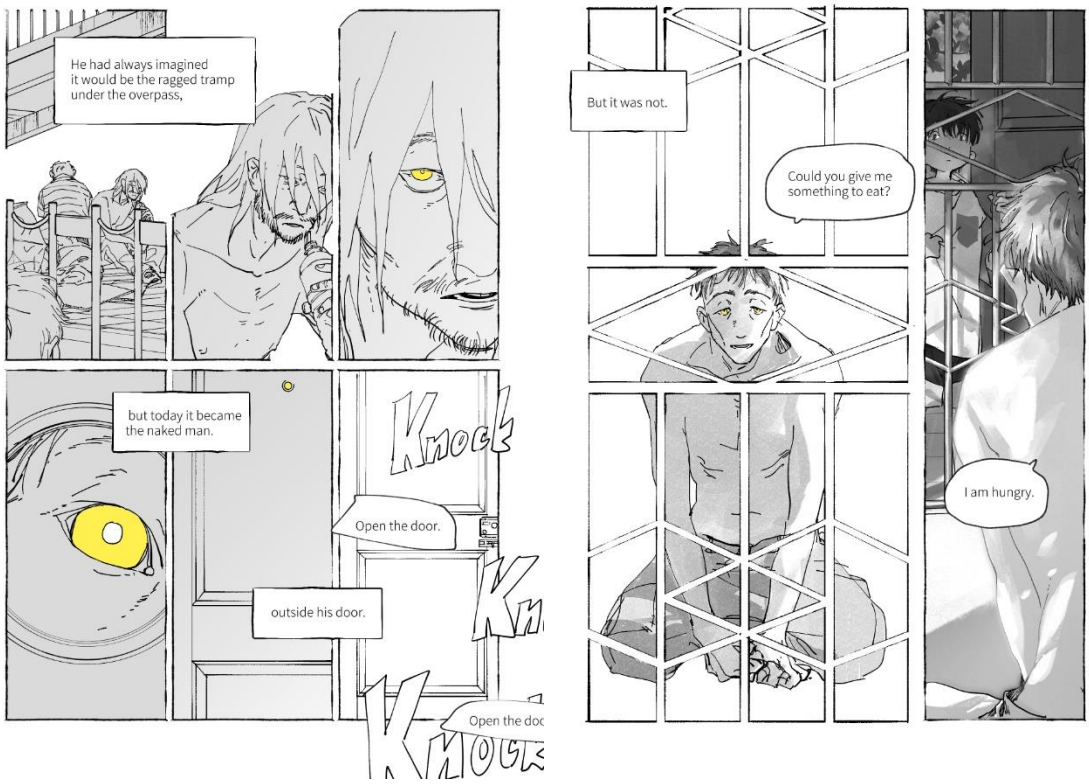

Figure 5. The dog man wearing the same clothing as the homeless man

The boy is the only child of a single-parent family, his mother is busy at work, and for safety reasons, he is not allowed to go out alone, so when other children are playing downstairs, he has to stay at home all by himself. The lack of friends of his age and the resulting loneliness and isolation without the company of relatives is the direct cause of the dog man's appearance as an imaginary companion. Because of the absence of friends and male elders in the boy's life, the dog man mostly appeared as a friendly, gentle adult man who actively communicated with the boy and cared about the boy's emotions, as seen in Figure 5. This was something that the busy mother was not able to do. At this stage, the dog man is portrayed as the boy's companion, with the dual characteristics of a friend and an elder at the same time.

At the same time, the boy was experiencing the development of his sense of self and the turmoil of his family. His mother was the boy's only family, and his deep attachment to her was the boy's strongest emotion besides loneliness. The boy's most intense motivation in the story was to meet his mother's expectations and gain her approval, but his desires were often in contradiction with his mother's wishes. For example, he did not want to cut his hair while his mother wanted him to do so, and he could not defy her, so he projected his preferred image of long hair onto the dog man (Figure 6. The dog man had long hair the boy wanted).

Figure 6. The dog man had long hair the boy wanted

When he discovered that his mother had left him at home for her boyfriend, he suffered from a strong sense of resistance to his mother's boyfriend along with a hint of envy that the

boy failed to realize. He envied the boyfriend who was able to get his mother's attention, so he unconsciously projected the features of his mother's boyfriend (leather jacket and sunglasses) onto the image of the dog man (Figure 7. The dog man wearing a leather jacket). At this stage, the image of the dog man is the boy's ideal self.

Figure 7. The dog man wearing a leather jacket

4.2. imagining friends is a manifestation of children's delicate mental world

Although both stories are built on the psychological phenomenon of imaginary companions, my interpretation of childhood is not the same as Burnett's in *A Little Princess*. In the story, Sara had always used active imagination to modify the appearance of reality in her

mind. She had total control over her fantasy. The core of *A Little Princess* story is what imaginary companions can do for you. Burnett emphasizes that children can become a wiser, more mature version of themselves by empowering themselves to carry through hardships and obstacles through imagination. But my motivation for creating *Mirage* was more to focus on why children create imaginary companions.

In the process of creating imaginary companions, the boy who is the protagonist treats his fantasy more passively. Deep down in the boy's heart, he always knew that the dog man's true identity was that of a stray dog, because he had never treated the dog man in the same way as he treated humans. Since their first meeting, he had shared his lunch with the dog man by tossing out food, or feeding him by hand—just like how he would with a real dog. The boy did not realize in the story how he had changed the dog man's outward appearance with his expectations for once, just as Lynn did not realize how his imaginary companion Nosey had changed the image of the worn-out stuffed dog in general. Children are aware that they create imaginary companions, but they do not fully understand what they are doing to their imaginary companions, because imaginary companions appear precisely because of the immaturity of the child's mind. Compared to the distress of the real world, the emergence of imaginary companions can help children rationalize their inner anxieties and desires safely and soothingly.

So, when the boy tried to prove to his mother that he locked the door to his room because he felt the danger, he accused his mother's boyfriend, who had not even been upstairs, rather than the dog man, who was just outside of being a threat to him, because deep down he knew that a stray dog who could not get in the door was not the real threat he faced

and that the strange man outside the door was a fantasy he could control. It is his mother's boyfriend, who has taken away his mother's attention and shaken the family order, that is his real fear.

A Little Princess ends with Sara living a happy and fulfilling life, having become a more mature and stronger version of herself. She put Emily down, of her own accord, and no longer needed Emily to accompany her through difficult times. But *Mirage* tells the opposite story. The boy's imaginary companion became fleshed out as he grew up, but his imagining of a perfect elder, friend, and himself still could not stop the outsider—his mother's boyfriend—from breaking into his own family. At the end of the story, he did not say goodbye to his imaginary companion of his own accord, as Sara does. Instead, he was ripped from his imaginary companion. The dog man puts on his sunglasses and leaves him, while he is pushed through the iron gate by his mother. Although his imaginary companion momentarily supported his loneliness, it failed to support him to step out of the iron gate to gain freedom as a big boy. The strength he gained in fantasy is still a mirage, and in reality, he remains trapped in a delicate, powerless childhood.

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