

Beyond Narrative: Salvador Dalí's Surrealist Illustrations and the Subconscious World of Alice in Wonderland

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Abstract. This article aims to explore the surrealist illustrations created by Salvador Dalí for "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" in 1969. I believe his visual interpretation of this work has transcended the realm of traditional narrative description and directly incorporated the subconscious and dreamlike qualities found in Lewis Carroll's text. Dalí employed surrealist techniques, which included elements such as symbol distortion, presentation of flowing forms, and the use of psychological abstraction. Through these techniques, he captured all of Alice's unique emotions during her journey and the emotional confusion she faced. This article specifically analyzes key illustrations such as "The Pool of Tears" and "The Crazy Tea Party", with the aim of proving that Dalí's creative method is consistent with Freud's dream theory and also consistent with the contemporary psychological concept of Alice in Wonderland Syndrome. The paper also included how Surrealism evokes the audience's imagination and cognitive flexibility. The following text further explained, that Dalí's work not only accompany the story, but also participated in the process of the development of the story itself, explored deeply in the aspect of growth, identity and absurdity.

Keywords: Salvador Dalí, Alice in Wonderland, Surrealism, subconscious.

1. Introduction

Over the past few centuries, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland attracted a large group of readers constantly with its dreamy narrative tone and thought-provoking stories. While many artists tried to exhibit the magnificent scenes in the book, Salvador Dalí's surrealist artwork, done in 1969, was absolutely unique. Those pieces did not just present direct scenes in the story, instead, they somehow evoked the subconscious trends in Carroll's novel by using twisted lines and symbolic forms. The paper holds that Dalí's creation surpassed the scale of traditional arts, it is more like a mysterious visual gateway, that leads readers to Alice's wonderland. By drawing on the principles of Surrealism and Freud's theories, Dalí transformed the wonderland into a space for emotional and perceptual exploration. This article will analyze Dalí's main illustrations, compare them with John Tenniel's classic works, and place them within a broader psychological and cognitive framework [1].

2. Background

For over 150 years, the story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has been attracting a large number of readers. Its charm lies not only in the words written by Lewis Carroll, but also in the fact that these words have constructed a particularly vivid and strange world, which gives people a feeling similar to a dream. For several generations, from John Tenniel to Tim Burton, artists have all sought to present the world visually. However, it seems that no artist is more suitable than the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí to express the content of this story. In 1969, He created a set of 12 illustrations for the limited edition of this book [2]. Dalí utilized surrealism as his principles. His works were not just about telling the story, he provided a psychological analyze of the wonderland by using colors, symbols and distorted forms wisely. This made his version of fairyland the best visual interpretation of Carroll's classic. The commission for this project came from Mesenas Publishing House, a quiet famous publishing industry at that time, well-known for producing high-quality limited-edition publications. By the late 1960s, Dalí had become a globally renowned idol. The combination of him and Alice is actually a manifestation of two different cultural phenomena. The historical background

is also crucial. By 1960s, people regained a strong interest in psychedelic experiences and consciousness, the stories written by Carroll could be regarded as one of the periodic products under this counterculture. Although Dali was not a member of this movement, the illustrations he created echoed the obsession of people in that era with the expansion of their thinking. However, the images he created were not based on pharmacology but on a disciplined artistic exploration of the subconscious. This artistic exploration has been ongoing for over 40 years. The illustrations he created in 1969 can be regarded as a climax of the theme he adhered to throughout his life. And by applying these themes to the narrative, in many respects, these illustrations are like a perfect container [3].

3. Surrealism

If one wants to understand why Dali's creative approach is so effective, one must first learn about the art movement he participated in and led, namely Surrealism. Surrealism is a movement in the fields of art and literature that began to emerge in Europe in the 1920s. Its main purpose is to release the power of the subconscious. The Surrealists were greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud's psychological theories [4]. Freud believed that dreams were a window into our innermost desires, fears and conflicts. They wanted to break free from the logical and rational control of conscious thinking to create unexpected, unreasonable and dream-like artworks. Artists like Dali developed techniques such as auto-ism and painted those strange, illusory scenes as clearly as photographs. Just as the founder of this movement, Andre Brittany, wrote in his "Manifesto of Surrealism", their aim was to resolve the contradiction between dreams and reality in the past [5]. Let them become an absolute reality, that is, a surrealism. In simple terms, they just want to blend dreams with the real world. In Western literary classics, no story is more suitable for this goal than "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland". In this story, cats will disappear into the air, babies will turn into pigs, and time will stand still at tea parties. To fully appreciate Dali's creative approach, we need to distinguish between the two main schools of Surrealist visual art. One is the biological, abstract and automated style adopted by artists like Joan Miro, and the other is the realistic or illusionist style that Dali refined. Dali's "paranoid-critical method" is his unique contribution. He describes this method as a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena" [6]. In practice, this means that he creates a state almost like an illusion. Then, the final visual effect is presented with particularly fine precision, like that of photography. This technique is crucial for us to understand Alice in his paintings. What he depicts is not a distorted world, but a distorted one with a surreal clarity, which reflects a dream-like experience. When the dream occurs, it feels as if it were real. Such a painting method gives the audience a strong sense of disharmony. The audience is confronted with an impossible scene presented in a credible way, thus replicating the absurd feeling that makes people feel credible in the fairyland. Surrealism is fascinated by childhood and primitive mental states because these areas are not bound by reason. This makes Carol's story a particularly suitable theme. Essentially, Alice's journey is like a pioneering novel of surrealist narrative, in which the logic of the adult world is gradually dismantled [7].

4. Case Analysis

The illustrations drawn by Dali are easily recognizable because they look different from those in other versions of this story [2]. He did not adopt the traditional way of textual narrative illustration established by Tanniel. Dali did not draw a real-life girl who fell into a rabbit hole. Instead, he used his own signature visual language to express the feeling of this story [2]. The prints he drew featured particularly bright colors, such as yellow, blue and red [2]. These colors make people feel energetic yet a little unstable. The lines in the painting are not sharp or distinct, but rather gentle, as if they have melted. This makes everything in the painting seem fluid and temporary, much like the changing

reality in a dream. One of the most representative examples of his style is the illustration he drew for Chapter Two, "The Pool of Tears" [2]. In this story, Alice was too big to live in the White Rabbit's house. She shed many sad tears, forming a pool of tears. Most illustrators, like Tenniel, would draw Alice in a real pool, usually with a mouse swimming beside her. But Dali's version is completely different [2]. In the scene he painted, there is no water. However, against a deep blue background, there are some abstract, glittering golden tears [2]. These tears are not in liquidity shapes; they were depicted closer to some form of molten spirits. In the very center of the picture, there is little Alice, standing there overwhelmed by the ocean of emotions. That is not the identical plot from the novel, by an extension of the psychological context behind. There, tear symbolizes the emotional pressure arising with growth and maturity, which is also a core theme of Alice's adventure. Another particularly brilliant reinterpretation is the image he captured for the famous "Mad Tea Party" [2]. Tenniel's original painting depicted the hatter, the March hare and the dormouse in great detail, sitting at a table with the dejected Alice. Dali's version removed all these literal details, and his print showed a slender figure [2]. This figure looks like both a person and a shadow, stretching out on the canvas. This character holds a key in his hand. This is a common symbol in dreams and Dali's works, usually representing solutions or mysteries. Around this character, the space feels particularly vast and empty. Soft, melting clocks cover the barren landscape [2]. These clocks are directly inspired by Dali's most famous painting, "The Persistence of Memory". They particularly perfectly captured the theme of the tea party, namely the abuse and distortion of time. The hat-maker has been trapped at six o'clock all along, and time itself has lost all meaning. Dali's painting of the melting clock is the ultimate symbol of this distorted, flowing and absurd relationship of time. He doesn't need to paint figures to make us feel the psychological madness of the moment when time loses all its power. Perhaps the most prominent difference between Dali and other illustrators lies in his approach to Alice herself [2]. In most descriptions, Alice is the only solid, logical and realistic element in this crazy world. She is the reader's support. Dali challenged this idea. In his illustrations, Alice is rarely a clear focus [2]. Most of the time, she appears as a hazy silhouette, like a girl skipping rope on the horizon. Or perhaps a tiny figure vanished into a huge and strange landscape. In the illustration he drew for the beginning of the book, Alice was merely depicted as a simple, childlike skipping rope shape, as if she were an idea rather than a person [2]. This choice is quite insightful psychologically. In our own dreams, most of the time we are not fully formed. We are both observers and participants. Sometimes it's just a sense of existence. By making Alice less real and more symbolic, Dali enables the audience to directly stand in her perspective. We are not watching Alice have a strange dream; we are Alice, personally experiencing that sense of uncertainty and strangeness. This technique takes us into the subconscious world of the story, which is something realistic painting cannot achieve. To expand the analysis, we can consider Dali's explanation of the chapter "The Caterpillar's Suggestion". This scene is largely related to an unstable identity, as the caterpillar has been actively questioning Alice's self-awareness. Tenniel depicted this scene in a very straightforward way, and the picture shows a very realistic Alice. Facing a caterpillar smoking a pipe on a mushroom. However, Dali expressed the psychological core of this encounter through the visuals. In his prints, there is mainly a huge object without a fixed shape, which reminds people of a caterpillar and a person in a state of decomposition. This object is very soft in texture and gives people a feeling almost very sincere. The figure in the picture is broken by a cane - this is also a symbol that often appears in Dali's works, representing a support for the fragile reality. Alice is just a tiny, blurry outline at the bottom of the picture. Compared with the huge entity above her head that raises questions at first glance, she appears particularly insignificant [8]. This photo can more effectively capture the deep anxiety brought about by the identity crisis than description in words. It is not an example of a conversation Rather; it is to illustrate the feeling when a person's existence is questioned. Similarly, for the croquet court of the Queen of Hearts, Dali did not paint the comical and chaotic scenes of flame-bird croquet and hedgehog croquet. Instead, he depicted a desolate landscape under an oppressive sky, scorched by the sun, with tall, ghostly figures engaged in a ritualized game. The perspective of the picture is distorted, thus creating an atmosphere that makes people feel dizzy and threatened. This is in line with the psychological aspects hidden in

this scene. Here, it's not playing a game but exercising power at will. The rules here are absurd, and the punishment is death [9].

5. Discussion

Some people might say that the original illustrations drawn by John Tenniel are the "authentic" versions because they were created together with Carroll and reflect the Victorian spirit of this book. Tenniel's works have undeniable historical value. Some might prefer the original illustrations by John Tenniel, because they were created together with Carroll and reflect the Victorian spirit of this book. It is undeniable that Tenniel's works have great historical value, his detailed black-and-white paintings defined the characters of several generations. But in essence, these creations only served the textual narrative, instead of transcending the subordinate status of illustration. Dali's works are almost the contrast; they are examples of the subconscious experience of the story. He doesn't care much about showing the Mad Hatter's hat, but rather about the feeling of being at a meaningless party. His art is not a competition with Tenniel. It works on a completely different level to evoke the emotional and psychological core of the fairyland, rather than the literal plot. When Dali's explanation is considered in conjunction with the psychological concept of "Alice in Wonderland Syndrome", it can resonate deeply [10]. This is a real neurological disorder in which patients' perception of size, scale and time is distorted, feeling that their bodies or objects around them are shrinking, expanding or distorting, just like Alice in the story. Psychiatrist John Todd named this syndrome in 1955 because its symptoms were particularly similar to the fictional experiences in Carol's story [10]. The rotations, abstract patterns, and changing perspectives in Dali's paintings imitate the "perceptual distortions" and "visual breaks" described by AIWS patients. His works have become a direct passage into this changed state of consciousness. The connection between surrealist art and the stimulation of imagination is also supported by psychological research. Studies have shown that exposure to absurdist, surreal, or nonsensical literature---like Alice in Wonderland or Franz Kafka's A Country Doctor---can actually enhance cognitive flexibility and creativity [11]. When our brains are confronted with illogical or impossible scenarios, they are forced to work harder to find patterns and meanings, thereby becoming more agile and open to new ideas [11]. Dali's illustrations, by refusing easy logic and presenting a world of dreamlike absurdity, actively engage this mental process [11]. They don't just tell us about Wonderland; they force our minds to wander, to make new and unexpected connections, much like Alice herself must do to navigate her journey. In this way, Dali's art is not passive; it is an active participant in the psychological experience of the story, challenging the viewer to "believe six impossible things before breakfast" and thus exercise their own imaginative muscles [11]. This cognitive process can define as "defamiliarization", a concept expounded by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky [12]. Dali's illustration applied this principle in an outstanding way. He gave up on the narrative part and pulled this already obscure story even further. This forces the audience to feel those stories with pure sensory. Tenniel focuses on endowing unfamiliar things with recognizable forms while Dali makes the familiar strange again, returning the fairyland to its original essence and turning it into an inexplicable, inner dream [13].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Salvador Dali's Alice in Wonderland is not only a set of illustrations to accompany a classic book, but also a psychological interpretation of the surrealist dream. By focusing on the distortion of symbols, emotions and reality, Dali bypassed the part of our brain with logical thinking and directly communicated with our subconscious. Whether the molten clock or the tear pool, they captured the bizarre essence of the wonderland. Under the fantasy, there lies the confusion of growing up and the uncertainty of identity. If Tenniel gave Wonderland a figure, Dali gave it a mind. Ultimately, Dali's illustration in 1969 occupies a profound position in the long history of Alice's adaptations. These illustrations are not intended to replace Tenniel's pioneering works; On the

contrary, they are essential counterparts. In fact, they reminded us that great literary works—like Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland—is not simply a single entity, but a complex system composed of various symbols and combinations. Together, they bring audience endless wonders and unforgettable sensory experiences.

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