

What Children and Cats Hide: Exploration of Childhood Through Surrealist Writing

WLL 499: Capstone Project

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Abstract

This capstone project in Creative Writing consists of two parts: a short story collection and theoretical analysis of the creative work. The stories in the collection are inspired by and comment on the mundane experiences that almost everyone goes through as a child: being scared of darkness and creatures that lurk in it, or worse getting ready for and suffering through tedious family gathering. However, the world in the stories only seems mundane and 'normal' at first. It is in fact an absurd, exaggerated, and more unpredictable version of that what people call "normal life," and what it has become in the modern era: a form of experience dominated by aims and functions, and relieved only by the temporary respite of organized leisure' (Laxton 1). The child perspective is used to deconstruct our rule-bound reality, highlight some of the hidden issues or problems they face in real life, rebel, and escape from them. Theory of play can provide a deeper insight into the child's mind and draw the connection between Surrealism and child consciousness.

Under the Blanket

It is the time of the night when every sound of the old khrushchevka makes her squint and hide under the blanket because everyone knows that monsters can't get there; but only if all of you is under that blanket. The little fingers grab a little silver cross on her chest, and she mumbles the only two prayers her mother taught her when she got a little older until it feels like there is no more oxygen under the blanket. Everything goes silent. She sticks her head out of her blanket fortress. Takes a quick breath and stops, listening. The beaded curtains sway slightly in the darkness. Click, Click. Did they just walk by?

She jumps out of her fortress and runs towards the light switch. It is invisible in the dark, but she knows where it is. The dim yellow, almost orange light of the last two working lightbulbs lighten the room. Old Panasonic TV that her grandparents gifted her when they bought themselves a new tinier one that hasn't been switched on for months, some movie posters on the walls, and the burgundy curtains that always stayed closed during the night so the light of the bright street lantern wouldn't come into the room - everything is the same. Dead people on the portraits whose names she was always forgetting sleep peacefully while Deva Maria and Saint Nikolai are watching her closely with their eyes unmoving. Okay. She waits a minute until the beads stop swinging from her sprint towards the door and switches off the lights again. She closes her eyes and runs back. But something is not right. Eyes still closed she holds her breath. The beads are silent, but there is something else. Squeak squeak. She opens her eyes: left then right. A glimpse of spiky hair in the window and she makes another run for the lights. The spiky hair is still there in the bright light of the street lantern. They are not afraid of her like she is of them.

Lights on. Holding her breath and on her toes she walks towards the burgundy curtains. Carefully she peaks through the small hole in the curtains that she accidentally made

a month ago or so and was now hiding it from her mother. Mama wouldn't allow such a thing if she ever found out. But it just so happened that it was perfect to peak through the window with one eye. She could watch pigeons sitting on their window without ever scaring them or she could watch the neighborhood kids outside without them knowing she was home. Also, it was just funny how dumb they were sometimes when they thought no-one was watching. On rainy days when everyone was home and she didn't need to look through the hole to remain unnoticed, she still did that. It gave her jitters and made her laugh, a lot. So, on rainy days she mostly watches this woman sit under the trees talking to the pigeons who cannot fly away. Sometimes the woman talks to her too. She is kind. The girl likes her even though she wears all black. And people who wear all black in cartoons are always evil. And her mother once confirmed that too.

She opens the curtains and it seems that there is nothing there. Just a really bright flashlight and -she exhales- the cactus. She lets it sink in for a minute. In and out. In and out. In and out. Just like they do in the singing classes at school. Lights off. But it's gonna be fine only when she gets under that blanket with a tiger on it. Tiger is her favorite animal because she was born in the year of the tiger according to the Chinese calendar. Also, it can protect and attack which can be very useful on a night like this. But the bed is so so far. She just makes a step and hears a loud squeak that brings her several steps back through the beaded curtains and into the dark corridor. She knows that the corridor light switch is in the farther end of the corridor closer to the living room which is not that far in the daylight. They have just two small bedrooms, one is her mother's and the other is hers, a living room with a big TV, a tiny kitchen where only two people and a big cat or a small dog can fit at the same time, a balcony which also doubles as a second refrigerator in winter right around New Year's when there is always too much food to fit in the kitchen, a toilet, sink and a bath - all in one room. All of it is connected by a small corridor with a big oval mirror in which you

can see your whole self if you stand close to the corridor wall and a small cabinet where mama keeps all her cosmetics. Mama does not have that much make up, barely enough in the girl's opinion. When she grows up she will have so much more and no one will be mad at her for using it all up.

But by night everything moves and distances change, close becomes far and far becomes farther. She can see nothing but hears everything. Squeaks are all around her now. Most of them come from above and they are louder there too. She throws her back to see and the darkness breaks into thousands of black and not so black dots. But it is still just the darkness. She takes a deep breath and takes a step towards where she knows the wall should be. It will be safer this way. She will always know where she walks even if she does not see anything else. Her hand touches the cold wall and she can feel wallpaper flowers under her fingers. It calms her a little.

Something squeaks right above her.

She gasps and moves on, sure-footed. One, two, three, ..., twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine- the journey that usually takes her five steps (she counted them since before she didn't know how to count) is twenty-nine this night. She stretches out her shaking right hand toward another darkness, her left hand trying to keep her fast-beating heart jumping out of her chest. Another set of beaded curtains- she made it, hoping she did not accidentally make a turn and come back to the room. Although still dark, it is much lighter in the living room. And colder. She can see the sofa covered with a spotted blanket. She never knew what it was for. She just knows it gets all messy when she sits on it. It is fine when her mother lies on the sofa all Sunday watching the Russian Romance channel that features the same show all day every day but with different actors. Mama and her both know what's going to happen, it's always the same thing with these shows: a man and a woman are in love, but then they break

up, she moves to another city where she is saved by a handsome man with whom she talks twice, and just like that they fall in love. And yet she still always joins mama on the sofa to watch the same story over and over and over and over. In front of the sofa, there is an old brown cabinet, the one that every Soviet family had to have. In there her mama keeps some of the ‘used to be precious but now useless’ possessions like the old Zenith camera that doesn’t work but still goes cluck cluck-cluck chunk when the girl plays with it; the whole collection of the Big Soviet Encyclopedia in 30 volumes, the first part of volume 24 lost and forgotten, and mama’s wedding pictures that she hates to look at, probably because of her dress or her brother who died just a year or two after mama’s wedding. There is also a small table and two armchairs with covers that match the sofa, but it is still too dark to see the big table.

She cannot see but she knows that the dog is sleeping under the covers of her armchair. Mama and the girl each chose an armchair to sit on and she never dares to sit in mama’s spot. She runs towards where she thinks the chair and the dog are. She runs with her arms stretched out in front of her to avoid stubbing her toe or, worse, scratch, or more like double scratch her knee since it was already scratched badly after rollerblading. Her fingers curl around the leather arm of the armchair. It is cold, and sticky, and has breadcrumbs stuck to it. She lowers her hands and they hit a warm wooly circle. The circle unrolls a bit and rubs its wet nose against the girl’s hand.

The girl grabs the black furry thing with her small trembling hands. The disturbed thing moves around in her hands until two glowing dog eyes pop up in front of the girl’s face. A black and tan half-bred wiener dog, Knopka, was her mother’s friends’ present to her when she turned one. Mama was basically raising two kids with two hands and six feet in total.

Papa never liked the dog much. And Knopka didn't like him either. The girl didn't know whether papa was a good person, but Knopka is a good dog for sure. Knopka is kind and affectionate to people she likes and really mean to people she doesn't like which is honestly everyone else. The dog barks loudly when someone knocks on the door. And it hides under the table when mama turns on the vacuum cleaner. It is always happy when she comes back from school sometimes to the point of peeing on the carpet. Knopka loves eating chicken feet and walks around the block and doesn't like washing her paws afterward. It is a perfect dog for a little girl to have.

The girl feels braver with the dog. But it is so much more difficult to return now. Her hands are busy, and the corridor is longer and darker. The corridor always gets longer when it's dark outside at night or during the dark early mornings. And it gets even longer when two people are walking through it and so so much longer when three. It wants to fit everyone and that's why they are always late for school in winter.

She holds the dog tight to her chest and takes a step to the right hoping to avoid the table. She can see the table, but the edges are too vague to tell where it ends. Scared she's been here too long now, she takes another step forward and bumps into the edge of the coffee table. The disturbed table starts trembling and the dog groans displeased. Shivering she walks toward the beaded curtains, last barrier between the darkness of the corridor and the living room. From here, if all remains as it was, it will be just twenty-nine steps to her room. And then a couple more steps to her bed.

She tries to free one of her hands, but Knopka is too big and too heavy. She shouldn't have been feeding her all those tefteli from her plate at dinner. Unable to hold on to the wall she decides to walk straight, counting her steps, as not to stray from the path. She makes the first step, from which comes the second, third, and then twenty-ninth. But there is no door, no

beaded curtains, no bright lantern light dimmed by the burgundy curtains from the window. She stops, her heart beating loudly. Thump thump. There is no other choice but to continue straight hoping she either will find a door or reach the bathroom where she can turn on the lights without waking up mama.

Their squeaking from above hurries her as she runs forward with her protector. She doesn't bother to count anymore. This is not the same corridor she passed before. Something squeaks and scratches all around her. She is tired of running and starts walking, trying to stay closer to the right wall where her room is supposed to be. She walks until a quiet click-click lets her know she is one step in the scary darkness away from her room. She makes the step and finds herself in her room with her couch bed and a teddy bear bigger than. She throws her teddy bear on the floor and gets under the blanket with the dog.

She holds on tight to the dog because she knows: as soon as she lets go Knopka will run away through the black corridor back to her usual place. They lie still for a bit, listening. The girl and the dog can still hear them moving somewhere in the darkness. The dog can lie in the girl's arms only for so long. Her mama is a strong believer that dogs should not sleep in the bed. She feels the dog trying to free herself, fight its way from under the warm stuffy blanket. As it does so she feels her change. The dog gets smaller. Its coat changes from short and coarse to long and smooth. It flows out of the girl's hands and slides under the blanket like a shadow which is not what a short-legged and a little overweight wiener dog usually does.

The girl carefully lifts the blanket just enough for her to check if the creature might stay to protect her. Maybe tonight is the night when it will be too lazy to go back. It is cold outside and what she thought was the dog is now a cat. And the cat is so long, almost as long

as the corridor, with all the fur, and stripes, and spots. There is no chance she can catch the cat again and hold on to her. The girl lets her go and curls up under the blanket, in the safe place. She knows that the cat has to be there for her mama. She is so big. She couldn't possibly fit under the blanket.

Family Dinner

My mother was not the type of woman to plan things in advance. She strongly believed that her plans would go wrong if she made them too early. However, there were events that did require planning and thinking through. One of them was, of course, the grand family dinner.

The family dinner took part once a year every year, except that one year my grandfather's sister's stepsister refused to leave her apartment for thirteen months. She violated three annual family dinner rules, so it had to be canceled. First, everyone should be there, or it would not be considered a family dinner. Second, she was not the one to host that year so we could not meet at her apartment. And third, it should take place on a day when everyone in the family would be positively happy. There were, of course, other rules stemming from basic social conventions such as 'everyone invited has to give a positive answer when called upon or rsvp as soon as possible if the message accidentally went to voice mail.'

This year it was my mother's turn hosting. September 13th was determined to be the date when everyone would certainly be positively happy. So, in four months every member of our extended family age 0 to 113, around 34 people would cram into our little living room assuming Grandma Nata is released from the hospital by then. It was not permitted for the family dinner to be organized anywhere but the host's house. No one was ever allowed to order food or ask other members of the family to bring anything but dessert and wine. It was agreed that this dinner should be equally laborious for rich and poor members of the family, giving an unfair advantage to my mother's younger cousin who had 8 children.

So, a couple of days before the dinner my mother asked me to resolve the issue with our upstairs neighbors. They were “awfully quiet” in my mother’s opinion and ruined the mood. I was not sure how someone we had never met could ruin the mood, but I went anyway. I went up the stairs and loudly knocked on the door. I hoped that would instill fear in them before they got to see my kind plump face. No one opened the door. I stood there for a while before I knocked again. No response. I pressed my ear against the door. It was silent inside.

When I came back my mother was making some last-minute changes to the menu. Creating a menu was surprisingly easy since no one in the family had any allergies (except for Aunt Anna, she was not biologically related) and they all hated fish. Although it was decided by our great grandmother that there always had to be one fish course at the family dinner due to its health benefits.

“There is no one home,” I said.

“Did you hear anything?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Hmm...” she said without looking at me. “Try later today. It’s gonna be raining around 6. Only fools would be outside when it’s raining on Sunday evening.”

That sounded right. I left our apartment 15 minutes past 6. I didn’t like being early to things but being late would probably be rude. I knocked again, louder this time. I felt the door being pushed slowly from the inside. It opened an inch without making a sound. I pulled the door and found myself in a small dark corridor. I was greeted by a sleepy angry cat, her eyes glowing green in the dim light.

“Hi, I am your downstairs neighbor!” I announced to the cat. She was not impressed.

The cat snorted and waved her long tail signaling me to follow her. The floors, the walls, and the furniture – it was all covered in carpets and drapes. It was nice and soft. And it was really great it didn't have that terrible cat urine smell. I saw about a dozen more pearl white cats in the living room. Most of them were sleeping. Three cats who I figured were younger than the others were playing, jumping from drape to drape, from carpet to carpet. The angry cat that greeted me offered me a seat on the red sofa.

“Oh, thanks.” I smiled as I sank into the cushion that was way too soft. “It is so nice to meet you.” I smiled at the angry cat as I sank deeper into the red cushion.

“So, we are having this big dinner at the end of the week,” I tried to pull away from the kitten sniffing my ear. I reached for an invitation card in my pocket and held it out to the angry cat.

In response, she extended her left paw and smacked the paper down from my hand and sat on it.

“Thank you for your consideration. There is no dress code.” I told them and pulled myself out of the sofa trap.

The blue door closed behind me and I descended back to my apartment.

“Is it solved?” Mother asked.

“I think we have reached some sort of understanding,” I said thinking about the angry cat sitting on our invitation.

Theoretical Analysis

“What Children and Cats Hide” is a collection of two Surrealist short stories “Under the Blanket” and “Family Dinner.” The collection is based on the ordinary lives of children and young adults. The stories in the collection are inspired by and comment on the mundane experiences that almost everyone goes through as a child: being scared of darkness and creatures that lurk in it, watching TV with your family, learning to talk (or rather not talk) to strangers, or worse getting ready for and suffering through tedious family gathering. However, the world in the stories only seems mundane and ‘normal’ at first. It is in fact an absurd, exaggerated, and more unpredictable version of that what people call “‘normal life,’ and what it has become in the modern era: a form of experience dominated by aims and functions, and relieved only by the temporary respite of organized leisure’ (Laxton 1). As Susan Laxton, the author of *Surrealism at Play* (2019), writes, our society has far too many rules and restrictions which create an expectation for every activity to be productive and have a merit, so in its turn Surrealism, ‘like other antiutopian avant-gardes of its time, militated against the disciplinary structures of industrial modernism’ (2). However, despite being opposed to this “normal” life, Surrealists often used it in their art. ‘Finding an increasingly pragmatic world taking shape around them, they played not merely against but with it, drawing mechanical systems into their ludic circle’ (Laxton 2). This quality of Surrealist writing is also very characteristic of children who from a very young age use the freedom of their imagination to create stories of worlds that are very similar to the world they live in but at the same time completely different and even contrary to it in any way they like. ‘It seems as if they are waging a war of sheer originality against conventional commonsense and righteousness’ (Sutton-Smith 94). Similarly, child protagonists of the stories in the collection ‘deform and reform [their] observation and [their] relationship with the reality [they] observe as a subject’ (Vloeberghs 292) as children would in play. In my work child perspective is

used to deconstruct our rule-bound reality, highlight some of the hidden issues or problems they face in real life, rebel, and escape from them. Theory of play can provide a deeper insight into the child's mind and draw the connection between Surrealism and child consciousness.

Understanding of child's mind and representation of child consciousness in literature have always been concerns for researchers in fields of natural science, education, history, psychology, and child studies. Such interest is not surprising since understanding child's mind is often considered the key to understanding human evolution and later represent the unconscious mind (Blackford 2). Carolyn Steedman, the author of the book *Strange Dislocations*, argues that 19th century developments in child studies changed the understanding of the idea of self 'which culminated in the modern period, when childhood became synonymous with the unconscious mind' (Blackford 2). Thus, many popular books that have children as their main protagonists such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, or Neil Gaiman's *Ocean at the End of the Lane* use these ideas to construct child consciousness.

Windows, mirrors, or any surfaces that distort the image often serve as lenses through which child consciousness is represented. Child's window is 'an inherently differently different than adult's' (Blackford 6). Children's reality mirrors everyday life but at the same time the reflection of the reality in a child's window is not quite the same as adult knows it. Looking through the window invites a person to experience different world and different perspectives without losing ones own. Looking through the window implies looking at something outside without completely losing track of the inside. One can look through the window and peak into or imagine lives of other people without having to interact with them whilst 'the door invites interaction' (Botelho xii). In part, this is how children create the perception of the things or other people around them. For example, the girl in "Under the

Blanket” watches the woman in black from her window on rainy days. The girl listens to the woman talk to pigeons or sometimes her, but she does not engage. Instead, she just observes the woman and compares what she sees out there with her own experiences with people who wear all black, cartoon villains. Seemingly, from the perspective of the reader and writer looking through the child’s window implies getting and access to this radically different perspective that they might have forgotten and gain understanding of how childhood experiences and ideas shaped who we are as adults. ‘The window opens to a view of unlearning and relearning’ (Botelho 128). Thus, to write these stories from child’s perspective I had to turn to my own childhood memories and dreams to access the unconscious and produce Surrealist writing. Both dreams and memories allow a release from rationality. Freud would define childhood memories as ‘as inevitably subjective fantasies that are tinged with repressed drives and desires’ (Vloeberghs 295). However, despite seeming far from our rational reality dreams ‘retain their connection with the major interests in life, they seek to fulfill needs’ (qtd. in Laxton 15). Both dreams and childhood memories have a connection to the real world, its organization, how we experienced this world as a child, and what we wanted to change or escape from.

Brian Sutton-Smith, a major play theorist, highlights the ‘labile, intentionally contrary aspect of play’ (91). He collected nearly 155 jokes and folk stories of children and noticed that most jokes and ‘naively realistic’ stories children tell amongst themselves ‘were some type of attack or at least evidenced disrespect for conventional behavior or conventional thoughts or good manners’ (Sutton-Smith 91-92). He would describe children’s stories as chaotic and rebellious. Children use different objects in the world around them and combine them together in every way possible. Oftentimes, these stories would be seen as strange or offensive by the adults. Sutton-Smith provides an example of such story composed by the two-year-old girl Alice:

Alice, age two years:

The cookie was in my nose

The cat went on the car

The fireman's hat went on the bucket

The cookie went on the fireman's hat

The cookie went on the carousel

The cookie went on the puzzle

The cat went on the cake

The cookie went on the doggie

In this example the child uses everyday objects or things that she learned and combines them together ignoring the way those objects would be used in a real world. 'We again find that young kids display a freedom to make the world contrary in almost anyway they wish' (Sutton-Smith 94). They refuse the common sense and combine different objects in the story the way they see fit. Similarly, in my own story "Under the Blanket" which is written in the third-person-limited point of view, thereby allowing the reader to get inside the child's head while nonetheless maintain a semblance of objective distance, the child protagonist is often taking things for granted. She has her own beliefs that she never questions no matter how strange they might seem. For example, 'everyone knows that monsters can't get you under your blanket; but only if all of you is under that blanket' or 'dead people on the portraits whose names she was always forgetting sleep peacefully.' Moreover, sentences in this story are usually simple and direct to reinforce that effect of looking at the world from the little girl's perspective. Even though, the girl does not know a lot about the world around her, the adults, and their actions and cannot explain them, she creates her own explanations or just accepts the world as it is. 'In effect, these tales implicitly constitute a rebellious expression. Already at these early ages, children are implying that play allows them to overcome the stuffy and bossy adult world they encounter' (Sutton-Smith 94). For example,

the father is clearly missing from the girl's life and she does not know about him much, so she uses the bits of information that she knows about the father and compares him with someone she knows, her dog Knopka: 'Papa never liked the dog much. And Knopka didn't like him either. The girl didn't know whether papa was a good person, but Knopka is a good dog for sure.'

Moreover, the girl also has this indisputable belief, or maybe even knowledge, that there is something else in that apartment. And that something, although unnamed, is a source of a great fear for that child. She tries to hide from the problem, divides spaces in the apartment on safe (under the blanket) and dangerous (the dark corridor between her bedroom and the living room) so that it seems like everything is a game of sorts. Sutton-Smith in his "Play Theory: A Personal Journey and New Thoughts" writes that according to Freud, 'play is always an abreaction against such conflicted emotion, which makes play as such for him a form of therapy. As Freud might see it, perhaps, children are protecting themselves against varying hegemonic physical and human realities by making fun of them with these relatively obnoxious representations' (94). In "Under the Blanket," the girl does not make fun of her situation but uses her imagination to escape the reality in which some scary and traumatic situations happen. 'Play might be said to transcend emotionally the miseries of the world and allow escape into these happier, private versions of that world, often conjured with cognitive – even if disgusting – originality' (Sutton-Smith 95). Stories that the girl makes up for herself help her escape into a happier magical place. Indeed, the real world of the girl does not seem like a happiest of places. The reader is given hints that there is something else going on behind the surreal or supernatural starting from the very beginning of the story. For example, when the girl switches on the lights and looks across the room – 'everything is the same. Dead people on the portraits whose names she was always forgetting sleep peacefully.' Even though the girl thinks that everything is fine, it is apparent that there is some darker

story with all those dead people who sleep peacefully in the dark. The girl's imagination brings the portraits to life in order to compensate their loss. It is not apparent when those people died and who exactly died in their family, but the theme of death and misery is apparent throughout the story. The girl's imagination also makes up for the haunting absence of her papa who might be deceased or just absent in the story and the sadness for her mother who works so hard the only thing she can do on the weekends is lie in front of the TV watching the same Russian soap opera on TV. Similarly, the protagonist of the second story "Family Dinner" also covers up the issues in the family with absurdity. The child protagonist and her family have difficulty dealing with unhappiness or intimacy so they reconvene only on days 'when everyone is positively happy.' They cannot even stand their neighbors being silent as silence may mean unhappiness or dealing with negative emotions or occasions. Thus, absurdity distracts the protagonist and transforms her into the other world in which her family is always happy and her upstairs neighbors are a family of cats. 'Play's positive pleasure typically transfers to our feelings about the rest of our everyday existence and makes it possible to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful or even dangerous ordinary reality might seem' (Sutton-Smith 95).

To create this world that is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar I employed *ostranenie* or defamiliarization technique. *Defamiliarization* (or *ostranenie*) is the term coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay 'Art as Device' (1917). According to Shklovsky very often people recognize or do things automatically without being aware of what they are. It takes a mere second for a person to recognize an object on the subconscious (automatic) level and move on without remembering encountering it (Shklovsky 5). He brings up an example from Tolstoy's diary. Tolstoy described not being able to remember whether he dusted off the sofa or not after he finished dusting off the whole house. These actions were so 'unconscious and habitual' for him that he was unable to remember. Only if someone was to

consciously observe him doing it, they might have been able to retrace his actions (Shklovsky 5). So according to Shklovsky, *ostranenie* can be used to attract one's attention to such unconscious actions or objects. There are many ways in which an object can be 'defamiliarized' or 'de-automatized.' For example, a familiar object can be put into circumstances that are different from the circumstances, people usually encounter them in, or described from another foreign or distant point of view that would attract one's attention to the issue. Alternatively, Tolstoy uses *ostranenie* by describing something familiar without naming it as if it is encountered for the very first time. He also avoids naming the elements of an object juxtaposing them with the comparable elements of some other thing. For example, in "Shame" Tolstoy estranges the concept of 'flogging' by describing it and comparing it to other horrible methods of punishment (Shklovsky 6). Another example of how *ostranenie* is used by Tolstoy comes from "Kholstomer" where he does so by telling the story from a viewpoint of a horse (Shklovsky 7). Thus, putting objects in an unusual context can be used not only to attract a reader's attention to it but also explore them from a different point of view and uncover their new and surprising characteristics. The unconscious connects many thoughts and ideas to the objects which Freud calls 'condensation' in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (Frank 14). So, when one encounters these objects in unusual (defamiliarized) setting in real life it may evoke the 'condensation' of thoughts associated with this object, 'acting as visual representative of the original thoughts while remaining semiotically dissociated from them' (Frank 15). *Ostranenie* attracts the reader's attention to the said object and

[reveals] a deeply considered commitment to rethinking the fundamental contradictions of modern life—not in order to resolve them, but to embrace their inconsistencies and paradoxes as bearers of unprecedented constellations of meaning, and redirect them toward a rehabilitation of modern experience (Laxton 7).

Darkness in “Under the Blanket” defamiliarizes the apartment in the story and makes the child protagonist and the reader pay more attention to the objects and places that would have otherwise seemed perfectly normal. The story starts in the darkness with girl hiding under the blanket from something that lurks out there. It is unclear what or who might be out there, the reader cannot know because it is dark and neither girl nor the reader cannot see anything. The darkness estranges the room and attract the reader’s attention to the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings rather than her surroundings. Only when the girl switches the lights on the reader gets a glimpse into the daily life of the girl in her mother. She quickly recounts everything that she sees in the room: ‘Old Panasonic TV that her grandparents gifted her... some movie posters on the walls, and the burgundy curtains that always stayed closed during the ...Dead people on the portraits... Deva Maria.... Saint Nikolai.’ And she switches the lights off again which sends her back into the world of horror and strangeness. This brief moment is necessary to make the strangeness more apparent for the reader. Objects that seem to be perfectly normal in the light seem horrifying in the darkness. The reader might have forgotten about all of these mundane objects that do not have anything special about them if not for the darkness and child’s perspective. Writing these stories from the children’s perspective itself serves as an example of *ostranenie*. It would be more conventional to talk about the themes of death, absence, misery, identity, and even adulthood that appear in both stories from an adult perspective rather than a child’s perspective. Thus, this unusual and different perspective of a child who has a different conception of the world attracts the reader’s attention to how children conceptualize the world around them, how they rebel against it, and what lays beneath the surface.

Children exist in a world full of rules and conventions that they do not yet understand but have to abide by. In response, children create their own specific and strange but indubitable rules that govern their imaginary worlds. And those rules are to be taken

seriously, even though they might be just a part of the play. The rules of the play usually reflect some rules and restrictions children face in the real life (Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play* 36). It maybe rules of behavior, politeness, some societal rules, or something specific they face at home. Joining the game and accepting the rules ‘improves his absorption of commonly accepted social standards and his formation of moral motivation and voluntary behavior as well as introducing the child into national and general spiritual values’ (Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play* 36). Rules children create for their games can show what people believe about ‘cheating, fairness, niceness, and friendships’ and how they decide how to ‘know to respond appropriately to what is going on; how to interpret whether a response is nice or nasty; when to be serious; when not to be serious; when to defend friends, make allowances for the young, act deceptively toward those not in one's own group’ (Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play* 120). At the same time, making fun of some rules, exaggerating them, or denying them shows child’s rebellion against the norms as it was addressed earlier. In my second story family is governed by a set of such strange exaggerated rules: “the family dinner takes place once a year every year,” “everyone should be there,” “it should take place on a day when everyone in the family would be positively happy,” and so on. This absurd list of rules is intended to attract the reader’s attention to some social norms that people adhere to even when they are spending time with their own family. It is too often that our families expect us to be happy and fun or merry and loud instead of sharing our true feelings. Instead of a safe space family dinner often turn into theatrical plays where people try to hide their problems from their close people instead of seeking help or being themselves. There are also many cases when different family members have nothing and common or they have contrary views and so the rules that “everyone should be there” and “it should take place on a day when everyone in the family would be positively happy” turn family gatherings into torture for some people. And when people’s true feelings do come out it might turn into a fight.

Hence, in the story when the child is sent to confront their parents who are ruining the atmosphere of happiness by being too silent she meets a family of cats who live in this silent apartment with everything covered in carpets and drapes. She invites the cats to the family dinner but it is apparent that they cannot and will not adhere to the rules of the protagonist's family.

And lastly, at times the characters of the stories may seem more like adults rather than children. According to Nodelman, there is "some weirdness in terms of the way in which texts construct childhood as something children are both involved in and detached from, part of and superior to" (qtd. in Trivisiano 2000) it. In "Under the Blanket" the child protagonist of the story, nameless girl, at times displays very adult qualities. Despite of being scared, she resolves not to wake her mother and proceed with her quest alone, without even turning all the lights in the house on. In addition to that, at the end of the story she makes a grown-up decision to let the dog/cat go to protect her mother who 'is so big. She couldn't possibly fit under the blanket.' It could be said that she becomes almost 'superior' to her childhood fears and makes a step towards the adulthood. In the same manner, the protagonist of the second story is given a quiet adult task of getting to know the neighbors and inviting them for dinner.

In conclusion, in this project I explored the relationship between childhood play and Surrealism. Children protagonists react to the world they see around them and construct new surreal realities in which rules and norms imposed on them by the adults are questioned, made fun of, or exaggerated. Creating these new realities for children can help them overcome harsh reality and rebel against the established world order.

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This project represents my own original work in accordance with Nazarbayev University's Student Code of Conduct.

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