

Beyond Social Constructionism: A Structural Analysis of the Cultural Significance of the Child Star

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This article challenges the dominance of social constructionist theories of childhood by presenting a structural analysis of the child star as a recurrent, universal feature in the myths and legends of the world. The article argues that by conceptualising our understanding of children and childhood as being due solely to the socio-historical context in which they live, an important dimension of childhood may be overlooked. Through looking at media stories about child stars throughout the twentieth century, this article uses a psychoanalytic Jungian framework to explore deeper similarities and patterns in cultural story telling about children over different eras and social contexts. © 2008 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2008 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction – the anomalous child star in western culture

In contemporary western culture, the term child star has become synonymous with a particularly deviant type of childhood. Images of precocious young performers, monstrous stage parents, 'lost' childhoods and disastrous adult lives have all become part of the way child stars are commonly perceived thus often rendering them objects of pity, ridicule and disdain. Characterised by phrases such as 'too much too young' and 'scarred by success', newspaper feature articles, obituaries and interviews also work to reinforce this negative stereotype whenever a former child star dies, tries to make a come back or gets cast in a major film role. The young performer is also separated from 'normal' children in a multitude of subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, in general children are no longer expected to contribute to their family's income in western society and yet, it is not uncommon that children who find success working in the entertainment industry raise their family's standard of living through their economic activity. Furthermore, the vast majority of children are not encouraged or expected to start their careers when still receiving their formal education and children on the whole are expected to be 'natural' and unaffected and are not required to maintain and manage a professional persona. Taken together, these aspects of young stardom create an uncomfortable image of exploited children which stands in stark contrast to Zelizer's (1981) description of the modern child who is 'emotionally priceless yet economically worthless'.

One of the main reasons then why child stars are a particularly interesting group to investigate is their apparently anomalous status in relation to accepted, dominant tenets of contemporary western childhood. Indeed, the question of how the child star has managed to

continue to find a niche in our popular culture, given the protectionist attitude towards children which has characterised social and educational policy in the West in the last 100 years, is an intriguing one. Against the background of our current dominant definitions of what childhood should and should not entail the experience of the child star begins to stand out like a beacon as utterly incongruous with the innocent and protected space in which all other children are supposed to be growing up. The child star is, to all intents and purposes, an anachronism of an earlier time when the welfare of the child was not a priority and childhood as a special period of education and security was not seen as the right of all children. So why are child stars still demanded and still appearing? Presumably they are fulfilling some need, be it social, cultural or psychological, which is not met either by children in general or by adult performers, and thus there must be some explanation as to why they occupy a significant position in our cultural landscape, despite the disdainful way they are constructed by the print media.

Therefore, the central question to be addressed in the following analysis is 'Why do we have child stars?' What role do they play in western culture which cannot be satisfactorily filled by other means given the apparently treacherous experiences of those who have found fame early in life and our dedication as a society to protecting children from all possible danger and from the commercial adult world in general?

From a purely social constructionist perspective, this question would be somewhat difficult to explore because of the focus of this approach on the social elements of childhood, rather than on the less tangible, symbolic role childhood plays in the structure of human culture. Therefore, this paper builds on the methodological approach of theorists in the field whose analyses encompass the structural, timeless and universal elements of childhood which shape and define the position children hold in various cultures. For example, Qvortrup (1994) perceives childhood as a structural category, and James, Jenks and Prout (1998) describe how childhood can be conceptualised both as a structure and as the agency of children. They suggest that when researching childhood, one should consider:

the extent to which childhood is to be comprehended as a universal condition or better instanced in its cultural particularity. (1998)

This recognition of childhood as having universal elements has also been translated into empirical research by cultural theorists such as Steedman (1995) and Holland (2004), who have focused on the recurrent symbolic significance of the image of the child throughout changing cultural, social and historical contexts. For example, in her study of Victorian child acrobats, Steedman (1995) explores the way in which they became a symbolic vehicle, used to articulate ideas about child nurture and cruel and improper parental treatment. In a similar vein, Holland (2004) traces the symbolic significance of images of the child over the 20th century which have reflected a 're-evaluation of children's place in society as well as... adults' changing attitudes to children'. The long history of research which analyses the figure of the child in film (e.g. Wilson, 2003, Wolfenstein and Mead, 1954) and literature (e.g. Coveney, 1957; O'Malley, 2003) can also be understood as part of this tradition.

This paper draws on these structuralist conceptions of childhood and applies the approach to the figure of the child star. In order to further explore the question of why there are child stars in western culture, I also incorporate a psychoanalytic perspective in the form of the ideas of Kerenyi and Jung (1969) who attempt to explain recurring figures in social

narratives in terms of universal archetypes which are products of the collective unconscious.

I hope to make clear that attempting to explain the presence of the child star purely in terms of how they are constructed in contemporary society, would have fundamental limitations in explaining why certain versions and ideals of childhood re-appear again and again in different cultural and historical contexts.

Therefore, in the following analysis of a selective sample of newspaper and magazine articles about British and American child stars from Victorian times to the present day,¹ I argue that rather than being understood simply as pitiful victims of the 'evil' of late capitalist society and the resulting commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood which that brings (Giroux, 1998; Kline, 1993), the child star can also usefully be interpreted as a powerful, timeless archetype who moves through the narratives and myths of human societies in different guises while always playing the same function in the wider culture – to inspire and renew hope in world-weary adults and to bridge the space between the lived world and the divine.

The following section relates stories and descriptions of child stars to tales of extraordinary children in myths and legends. I then go on to explain this connection in terms of Jung's theory of archetypes and the unconscious and demonstrate how certain aspects of the Christ-child are evident in 20th century writings about child stars.

'Bigger than big and smaller than small': the 'child' archetype and the child star

While accepting on one level that the child is 'eternally a cultural invention' (Kessen, 1979), it also seems possible that the power of children to generate strong emotional reactions and feelings such as nostalgia, hope and pity is located within the human psyche and reflected by a culture rather than the other way around. Furthermore, in this context, child stars can be seen as ultimate embodiments of this power because of the way in which they represent ideals of childhood in the societies which create them. Taken from this perspective, the child star of stage and screen begins to look less like a symptom of the exploitation of innocence by a media-saturated, late capitalist society and more like a recent contribution to an ancient tradition of extraordinary children in myth and folklore from around the world. As Radford has noted in his study of exceptional early achievers:

Young heroes are universal in legend, from Alexander through George Washington to Robin, Batman's Boy Wonder. (Radford, 1990)

Radford claims that the idea that children might have some form of supernatural power or ability has persisted for centuries and still continues. From the earliest recorded myths and legends, the superchild has appeared, possessing extraordinary strength, precocious skills and abilities and/or a phenomenal speed of growth. For example, Hercules is said to have strangled two snakes in his cradle, Merlin spoke as soon as he was born and the supernatural growth of the hero is a 'plot device almost ubiquitous throughout Oceania' (Lessa, 1966).

Interestingly, elements of the supernatural, mythical marvellous child are evident in stories of child stars since Victorian times. For instance, in this extract from an interview with Dan

Leno, an adult vaudeville performer who had been working all his life in the theatre, emphasis and pride is placed on the fact that he started performing almost from birth and was in no need of the protective period of childhood:

Let us go back to the days of your childhood.

Oh, yes. I was never one of them. Somehow or other I got on to the stage at a very early age, and felt quite a man. They tell me I fell from my cradle not a 1000 miles from my birth. This catastrophe fixed me as an acrobat, and so I went on till I reached the age of eight. (*The Music Hall and Theatre* 05 October 1889)

Similarly, a later interview with the father of Mickey Rooney, in which Mr Rooney reflects on the medical wonder of his son's super fast development, highlights the endurance of this depiction of the child star as being inexplicably extraordinary:

'Mickey didn't have much of a childhood', his dad often reminisced. 'At the age of one and a half we had a doctor give him a thorough check-up, and he told us Mickey had the mentality of a ten-year-old. And by the time he was three, Mickey was earning a living on the stage'. (Quoted in Zierold, 1965)

In mythical tales, such developmental precocity serves to separate heroes from simple mortals and to mark out the individual as chosen, special and 'touched by the divine', destined to live through extraordinary events, to teach others lessons about life and ultimately to sacrifice their own personal happiness to the greater good of those they serve. That this method of separating out the 'hero' from the 'mortal' has been a common thread in constructing child stars as special and marvellous since Victorian times is testament to the strength of this 'plot device' to mark certain children out as having a significant destiny.

Indeed, Kerenyi, who worked closely with Jung in trying to devise a 'Science of Mythology', identified the great significance of the 'child' motif in Greek and Roman mythology and drew parallels with sources from India to Finland. However, although he warned against attempting to collate a comprehensive study of such incidences, claiming that it would 'contribute nothing decisive in principle'; he did assert that 'it would nevertheless produce a worldwide incidence and frequency of the motif' (Jung, 1959). Examples of such figures from the legends and folk tales of the world are frequent. From Lucia, the 'child of light' in Swedish culture, to the Ethiopian story of the 'miracle child' Tekla Haymonot, to the tales of the incredible childhood of Krishna, to the 'miraculous child' in the Russian Christmas story, to the Cuban legend of the 'Child of the Sun' to name but a few, the recurrence of the 'child' motif in the traditional narratives of a wide range of cultures is impossible to ignore.

Against this background then, the figure of the modern western child star of stage and screen can be interpreted, without too much of a stretch of the imagination, as a contemporary example of the legendary extraordinary child who has recurred in different guises throughout the stories of the world. Indeed, if definitions of success are culturally specific then what else would be expected from a modern day heroic child than to be famous and to look perfect in close up? Late capitalist society does not generally call for children with the ability to strangle snakes or defeat armies or indeed to wrestle with the supernatural forces of evil. Our definitions of a wonder child are all about image, sentiment and the reinforcement of stereotypical ideas about perfect children. Therefore, although in one sense the child star could be anyone's

child, there is undeniably something exceptional about them as they generally embody, or are presented as embodying, the facets of childhood which represent the ideal in that society at that particular time. Indeed, there are more similarities between the child stars of today and the child heroes of ancient myths, and all those children who have been marked out as exceptional in some way in-between times, than is initially apparent. The intention of the following discussion is to highlight some of these similarities and attempt to identify common threads which link contemporary representations of child stars to wider structural elements which inform traditional narratives about 'marvellous' or 'miracle' children. To this end, the proceeding section considers Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious with particular focus on the 'child' motif and its relation to the modern child star.

Archetypes and the collective unconscious

Jung argues that the extensive parallels among the mythologies of societies 'force' us to assume that we are dealing with 'autochthonous'² revivals independent of all tradition and thus that 'myth-forming' structural elements must be present in the unconscious psyche (1959) and that these products take the form of 'motifs', 'primordial images' or 'archetypes'. The 'child' motif is one example of these archetypes and is said to represent the 'preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche' (Jung, 1959). Other archetypes include the 'trickster', the 'spirit' and the 'mother', all of which appear frequently in dreams, myths and fairytales in various guises – for example, 'child' can appear as a dwarf, an animal or even as a golden egg. Clearly then, the motif is not intended to be understood as a real person – the 'child' is a symbol, not an empirical child. As Jung explains; 'The archetype does not proceed from physical facts, but describes how the psyche experiences physical fact' (Jung, 1959) although, as Jung concedes, in the last analysis it is impossible to say what the archetypes do actually refer to as they are manifestations of processes in the unconscious.

Jung uses the concept of the collective unconscious to explain the universality of themes and motifs in myths, and views the recurrence of archetypes as evidence of the eternal struggle for synthesis of the conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche and of the inherent human fear of loss of connection with their primordial, unconscious beginnings. The archetypes then are a vital link with the essential, original nature of human beings:

If we cannot deny the archetypes or otherwise neutralize them, we are confronted, at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present, which threatens to slip away from us. (Jung, 1959)

The 'child' archetype has a central part to play in assuaging this fear of loss of connection with the past as, 'over and over again in the "metamorphosis of the gods", he rises up as the prophet or first born of a new generation and appears unexpectedly in the unlikely of places' (Jung, 1959). Jung gives the Christ-child as the ultimate example of this 'child-god' motif who is described in the legend of St Christopher as being 'smaller than small and bigger than big', thus encapsulating the connection of supernatural, divine power with mere mortals which the 'child' archetype represents.

From this perspective then, in relation to our modern day child stars it seems reasonable to assume that in the secular, media saturated society we inhabit the 'new interpretation' of the

'child' has less to do with religion and more to do with celebrity. Indeed, as Jung asserts, archetypes cannot be disposed of as non-scientific, archaic relics of an earlier less rational time and nor can they be explained away, we are able only to; 'dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress' (Jung, 1959). That the 'modern dress' of the 'child' archetype is that of a media celebrity is somewhat inevitable given the social context in which the motif is now being expressed. However, analysis of descriptions of child stars also reflect the earlier mystical connections of the 'child' and the theme of religiosity is a recurrent, occasionally dominant one throughout 20th-century writings on child stars. This suggests two main possibilities: first, that the need for the child star to represent a connection between the natural and the supernatural, or the mortal and the divine is still very much alive and informs dominant constructions of the child star over the 20th century, and second, that the Christian concept of the angelic purity of the uncorrupted child are referenced in such descriptions because of some structural link between modern day child stars and the primordial figure of the 'child-god'. These themes will be explored in the following section which examines a selection of media writings about child stars during the first decades of the 20th century.

The Christ-like child star

The golden era of Hollywood produced a plethora of child stars including Shirley Temple and Jackie Coogan who were written about in popular publications of the time including *Moving Picture Stories* and *Photoplay Magazine*. A certain way of portraying such children was dominant, incorporating references to the angelic and saintly characteristics of these stars and their differentness from 'ordinary' children. Several attributes came up repeatedly in the selection of texts examined which seemed to reflect the association of these children with qualities which have traditionally been associated with the divine goodness of the Christ-child. According to the dominant themes in the data then, the child star:

1. *Has a natural, inherent talent that has not been taught*

She can talk, dance, sing, play the piano and violin, cry, play doll and play dead with equal ease and grace. She doesn't have to be pinched when the director calls for a stream of tears to roll down her chubby little cheeks, for she is emotionally, dramatically emotional, and feels her roles as deeply as do the grown-up stars. (re. Baby Lorna, *Moving Picture Stories* 28 July 1916)

2. *Embodies physical perfection*

Her pretty little doll face is so perfect that you hope she'll never, never grow older. A slender little figure, with a stateliness derived, perhaps, from her English-French ancestry, which is fascinating, supports her flower-like face. (re. Virginia Lee Corbin, 1917 Review in Lussier, 2000)

3. *Has a special, almost supernatural quality*

These two children...have ability that is absolutely staggering to the average person. Jane has been pronounced a most marvellous child actress. She is fearless, she has an elfin comprehension of 'stunts' that is amazing and a true dramatic sense. (re. Jane Lee, *Moving Picture Stories* 28 July 1916)

4. *Does not engage in annoying or irritating behaviour which would otherwise be typical of a child of their age*

Once when she was stubborn, her mother slapped her hands. She's never forgotten it and the one word 'punishment' is enough to settle any problem. (re. Margaret O'Brien in *Photoplay Magazine* 1943)

5. *Has a purpose in life to uplift or inspire others*

Ah Jackie, wonderful Jackie! Jackie is inspiring and inspired. Just to be in his presence is to feel inspired. His personality is beautiful, lovely. It's spiritual. You feel close to his spirituality. (Charlie Chaplin on Jackie Coogan 1921 quoted in Cary, 1997)

When the spirit of the people is lower than at any other time, during this depression it is a splendid thing that for just 15 cents an American can go to a movie and look at the smiling face of a baby and forget his troubles. (re. Jackie Coogan. President Franklin Roosevelt 1937 quoted in Zierold, 1965)

6. *Is often unusually intelligent and/or demonstrates developmental precocity*

(she) gave evidence of extraordinariness by talking at age 11 months. She also displayed unusual emotional ability at an early age – that is, she cried. When she was three, Virginia could sing in key, anything she had heard more than once. She had a wonderful memory, even at that early age, and was a remarkable dancer. (re. Virginia Lee Corbin. Quote from 1917 in Lussier, 2000)

The quasi religious status of the child star is exemplified in this extraordinary quote in an article in *Photoplay Magazine* in 1923 where the tacit relationship between the child star and Jesus is made explicit:

After meeting him several times with his serious little manner, his courtesies and profound remarks, you wonder, 'Am I hypnotized? Is he genius or child?' We talked, he danced for me and recited with a reverence close to holy, the words of 'My Madonna'. I thought of the Young King who stood in rags at the steps of the altar...and lo! Through the painted windows came the sunlight streaming upon him, and the sunbeams wove round him a tissue robe...I thought of Jackie as the Young King. And I went away wondering. For me Jackie is a masterpiece of life. Can the world change or time alter such a masterpiece? (Howe in *Photoplay Magazine*, 1923)

Endowing a select few children with such extreme Christ-like qualities in order to market films demonstrates the power which children possess to generate emotion and a deep sense of awe in adults (as well as the power which adults have to manipulate the image of the child). Even though the link between the Christ-child and the child star is not so baldly made today as it was in the Hollywood child star era, certain recurrent themes still seem to characterise the 'star-like' qualities of certain children which reinforce their supernatural status and thus their connection to the archetype of the 'wonder-child' or 'child-god'. From the readings of the data, these themes seem to be largely concerned with the specialness of the child both in terms of their physical appearance and their 'nature' and can be divided into two main elements, each of which will be explored below. These are the emphasis on the smallness and/or immaturity of the child in contrast to the size of his/her talent or success, and the highlighting of the importance of the child being 'natural'.

The sacred smallness of the child

As described above, the concept of the child as 'smaller than small yet bigger than big' is one which has recurred in stories about heroic children throughout the centuries and across cultures. As Jung explains, the motif;

complements the impotence of the child by means of its equally miraculous deeds. This paradox is the essence of the hero. (Jung, 1959)

Indeed, the 'tinyness' of child stars has long been central to their appeal, with some even making a whole career based on their unusually small stature. A well known example of this is Gary Coleman, the actor who played Arnold in the American 1980s TV sitcom *Diff'rent Strokes*. Coleman has a medical condition which prevented him growing taller than the height of a small child for the rest of his life and as a child star his longevity was almost entirely due to the fact that he could go on playing an 8-year-old when he was far into his teens. (Ryan, 2000)

In contemporary newspaper articles about child stars, this motif of sacred smallness tends to be in the form of a juxtaposition of the 'normal' child with his or her extraordinary talents or experiences. For example, the following description of 10-year-old Declan Galbraith identifies his childish tastes in food and toys, while highlighting his 'adult' success and miraculous talent:

Declan Galbraith likes The Simpsons... His favourite foods are lasagne, pizza and spaghetti Bolognese and he wants some new computer games for Christmas. But Declan possesses an extraordinary singing voice and it has won him a million pound recording contract with EMI... He has a voice coach and a manager. He even has his own fan club. Quite an entourage for a boy who still has a cuddly Barney dinosaur on his bed. (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)

The paradox of the child star who is 'smaller than small yet bigger than big' is encapsulated in this description of a performance by the Welsh singer Charlotte Church when she was 11 at a huge international event:

She comes on in a striped, floor-length gown whose adult formality only serves to emphasise her youth. Then the orchestra begins and from her tiny frame emerges a voice of startling maturity... You can just feel 18 000 hearts melt at the wonderful contrast between the chatty kid with the Cardiff accent, and the diva with the glorious voice. (*Daily Mail*, 10 November 1999)

The vulnerability of children who possess such 'gifts' seems to be part of their appeal. Indeed, the very passage of childhood to adulthood can be seen as a universal journey from helplessness to strength, with the child star perhaps lighting the way with hope for the future. Jung describes the power of the 'child' like this:

The 'child' is all that is abandoned and exposed and at the same time divinely powerful; the insignificant dubious beginning and the triumphal end. The 'eternal child' in man is an indescribable experience, an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative. (Jung, 1959)

Another consistent theme in media constructions of child stars across the 20th century is the emphasis on the importance of naturalness in the child's performance. This together with related concepts of innocence, purity and vulnerability seem to represent the central

characteristics of what is required from a child star in accordance with the 'wonder-child' archetype and is explored below.

The cult of naturalness

As bringers of light, that is, enlargers of consciousness, they overcome darkness, which is to say that they overcome the earlier unconscious state. (Jung, 1959)

In essence, the power of the child star appears to emanate largely from the authenticity of his/her performance in terms of being natural and unaffected. Such a performance embodies the pre-cultural, pure, immediate relationship which (very young) children have with the world and which could be seen as the very foundation of their power. Indeed, the supposed preternatural wisdom of children (as celebrated to such a great extent by the 18th century Romantic movement), has come to form one of the central tenets of western society's contemporary construction of childhood (Hockey and James, 1993). This power of child stars to connect world weary adults with something purer and more natural seems to be reinforced and celebrated in media stories, reviews and interviews in three main ways. First, artificiality and precociousness in the child star's behaviour is consistently derided. This is evident in the overwhelmingly negative attitude in the media towards children who have attended stage school, apparently expressing a shared sentiment that if 'it' doesn't come naturally, you can't be taught 'it', with the underlying assumption, of course, that 'it' is a divine gift. For example, the director of the film, *Billy Elliot* commented that:

We really wanted to stay away from stage schools...There are so many mannerisms they have been taught which you just have to spend time helping them unlearn. (*The Observer*, 27 August 2000)

The second related technique of reinforcing the idea of the child star as especially gifted is in the approval of naturalness in the performances of children. By responding to 'natural' performances and performers with admiration, the preferred style of child stars is made implicit in newspaper and magazine articles. For example, in relation to the American child actor Michael Fishman the following quote emphasises his untaught ability to portray 'boyishness';

Fishman...earned his role with his raw boyishness. He marched into an audition with no acting experience and few expectations. (*LA Times*, 31 June 1996)

Finally, textual descriptions of child stars tend to emphasise their innocence and inexperience of the adult world and in order to ensure child stars are seen as a non-threatening entity, their vulnerability is often alluded to. For example, the British child singing star Declan Galbraith is described like this:

But he's still a sweet boy, still delighted to come second in the local swimming gala...and bowled over by the cool little extras his burgeoning singing career have brought him. (*The Guardian*, 23 September 2002)

The naturally talented, demure, untaught yet pliable child star is, it seems, the ideal, encapsulating both the traditional concept of the exceptionally gifted wonder child and our contemporary obsession with childhood innocence and obedience.

Conclusion: the relevance of the 'child' motif in contemporary western society

As Jung reiterates and as this paper has explored:

'The child motif represents not only something that existed in the distant past but also something that exists *now*, whose purpose is to compensate or correct the 'inevitable one-sidedness and extravagances of the conscious mind' which has become too rational and progressive and thus is 'far from the laws and roots of his (sic) being'. (Jung, 1959)

The malleability of the 'child' motif to take on different guises in different ages and societies becomes clear when we consider the following assertion by Jung:

No archetype can be reduced to a simple formula... It has a potential existence only, and when it takes shape in matter it is no longer what it was. It persists throughout the ages and requires interpreting ever anew. The archetypes are the imperishable elements of the unconscious, but they change their shape continually. (Jung, 1959)

That archetypes 'change their shape continually' and yet are anchored to fundamental recurring symbols suggests that there is much more to the phenomena of child stars than a conventional social constructionist reading alone would allow. The possibility of conceptualizing the 'child star' as a universal symbol transgresses cultural specificity and suggests that a wider understanding of their significance is required. As Jung reiterates, the work of the 'child' motif is never completed – it will re-appear in different guises as long as the cycle of life and death continues:

The symbol always says: In some such form as this will a new manifestation of life, a deliverance from the bondage and weariness of life, be found...Love and joy is the message of the 'wonder-child', the new symbol. (Jung 1923 in Radford, 1990)

This article has explored the strange phenomenon of the child star from a structuralist perspective and has identified common threads and connections between various manifestations of 'special' children in publicly shared stories. By drawing on Jungian theories of primordial archetypes, and on imagery, narratives and symbolism from ancient myths and biblical texts I have attempted to re-define the child star as a powerful example of the 'child-god' or 'wonder-child' motif in order to demonstrate the limitations of a purely social constructionist approach to understanding the complex nature of childhood in our society. That the human need for a symbol of natural goodness and a connection to the divine has historically frequently taken the form of a 'special' child adds a layer of significance to the role of children in western culture which can easily be overlooked by focusing on the differences in how childhood is constructed in various times and places, rather than on the recurring similarities which also exist.

In relation to the central question of why there are child stars in western culture given the treacherous associations of child stardom with adult disaster, and our overwhelmingly protective attitude towards children's future well-being in all other areas, the preceding analysis has suggested an answer based on the salience of certain recurring narrative structures rather than on the dictates of the socioeconomic environment from which such young performers emanate. I have argued that child stars belong to the universal symbolic category of the 'wonder-child' who recur throughout the myths and legends of the world, signifying

wholeness and futurity to jaded adults. Within this conceptualisation of the child star as a modern manifestation of an ancient archetype, I have defined child stars as culturally significant because of their role in fulfilling this need for a symbol of hope, innocence and connection to the divine in a contemporary western context.

This paper has demonstrated the usefulness of considering a structural perspective in explaining the symbolic value of childhood and has built on previous approaches to identifying universal themes in this area by including a Jungian perspective in an attempt to further understand how childhood fulfils certain cultural 'functions' in society. The theoretical framework employed has allowed room to explore the patterns and similarities which exist in the way childhood is made meaningful across different times and cultures, a course of enquiry which may well be of equal value to the ongoing documentation of diversity within childhood, which is the central concern of social constructionism.

Notes

1 The material used in this paper to illustrate my argument is part of a much more comprehensive data set collected for a large-scale project. I have therefore selected quotes and extracts which most clearly support my points, and have taken a somewhat sweeping approach to a long period of history in order to give as broad an account of the subject as possible in a limited space.

2 Meaning that certain mythological narratives which developed in apparent isolation from each other covered similar themes, content and characters. This is the essence of Jung and Kerenyi's argument that therefore myths must spring from the psyche rather than be spread socially.

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