



# The revisited self-portrait of a grandmother

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## Abstract

Self-portraits are mirrors of the deep psyche, reflections of the states of the soul. When serially analyzed, as images of dreams, they reveal an ongoing process, a trodden path. Some of the roles experienced by the author –as observer of psychic processes, therapist of children in their playful activities, and grandmother of girls in a constant discovery–, are pictured here, emphasizing the search for the inner child as an important part of the creative maturity. Eager to be fulfilled, human kind goes through several steps and tasks that endorse the first and second halves of life. Recognizing and integrating the gains and losses of these stages is a necessary condition in the quest to know oneself.

## Descriptors

child psychology, family members, individuation, grandparents, children.

## Conflicts of Interest:

The authors state no professional or personal interest that may create a conflict of interests regarding this manuscript.



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## O autorretrato de uma avó revistado

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### Resumo

Autorretratos são espelhos da psique profunda, reflexos de estados da alma. Ao serem olhados em série, como as imagens dos sonhos, revelam um processo em curso, um caminho trilhado. São retratados aqui alguns dos papéis vivenciados pela autora, como observadora de processos psíquicos, terapeuta de crianças em seu fazer lúdico, e como avó de meninas em uma constante descoberta, enfatizando a busca da criança interior como parte importante da maturidade criativa. Na ânsia de completar-se, o homem passa por diversas etapas e tarefas que referendam a primeira e a segunda metade da vida. Reconhecer e integrar as conquistas e as perdas dessas fases é condição necessária à busca de si mesmo.

### Descritores

psicologia da criança, membros da família, individuação, avós, crianças.

## El autorretrato de una abuela revisited

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### Resumen

Los autorretratos son espejos de la psique profunda, reflejos de los estados del alma. Cuando son analizados en serie, como las imágenes de los sueños, revelan un proceso continuo, un camino recorrido. Son descritos aquí, algunos de los roles experimentados por la autora, como observadora de los procesos psíquicos, terapeuta de niños en su quehacer lúdico, y abuela de niñas en un descubrimiento constante, haciendo hincapié en la búsqueda del niño interior como una parte importante de la madurez creativa. Con ansias de sentirse completo, el hombre pasa por varias etapas y tareas que avalan la primera y la segunda mitades de la vida. Reconocer e integrar los logros y las pérdidas de estas etapas es una condición necesaria para buscarse a sí mismo.

### Descriptores

psicología infantil, miembros de la familia, individuación, abuelos, niños.

## Introduction

A long time ago, during an art show at the *Palazzo Reale* in Milan (Italy), I felt deeply touched by a Vincent van Gogh painting: in this work he painted his own image. Since I saw this painting, I have become interested and I started to dedicate myself, over several years, to study self-portraits of various artists, approaching them in different perspectives. As suggested by the writer Katia Canton (2002), the human being seeks to perpetuate himself by leaving marks of his own image: his different moods at different times of life.

When serially examined as the images of a dream, self-portraits reveal the continuous flow of images of the unconscious.

During the various stages of an individuation path, several self-portraits are performed. As we come across with images that appear at different times, parts of ourselves register and reveal themselves in a process of interrogation and constant construction: how, at each moment, we see ourselves; the transformations of the image in each stage and at different ages. But something remains despite the changes: the child who has always existed and is present in the essence of each one of us.

The last self-portrait done by Vincent van Gogh – which had also been portrayed in the famous painting “Bedroom in Arles” – even though represented a moment of intense anxiety – as it displayed the painter with his face marked by pain and suffering – presented the artist as a very young man, a reference to a distant past. It was this painting which kept the marks of time and of the young man who always existed in him. We can say that, as we age, we become more and more ourselves.

Addressing the archetype of childhood, Bachelard and Danesi (1996) say that there is a still, but always alive, childhood in the soul: “Were we or have we been dreaming to be, and now dreaming of childhood are we ourselves?” (p. 103).

As a child therapist, I am invited to participate in the “process of becoming” of every child that comes into my office, in which the natural changes over growth are constantly revealed.

As Jung said (2002),

Childhood, therefore, is important, not only because several atrophies of instincts are originated from it, but also because it is the time in which terrifying or motivating –before the soul of the child– dreams and images of broad vision, come, to condition his destination (p. 60; OC VIII/1: 98)

## The playful and the child who becomes aware of himself

During the playful-therapy setting, many resources are used as mediators of the analytic encounter: non-verbal language, play themes, fantasies and memories help in clarifying and elaborating the anxieties in the formation of the early years of the child development.

Painting, clay and stories are forms of communication and express symbolic images, enabling the understanding of child's psychic world, and announcing what is to be seen, experienced and integrated into consciousness.

The told, read and/or represented stories bring a magical language that enchants and points out possibilities and outputs. Being driven by the pleasure of the spontaneous and of the discovery is exciting and liberating.

According to Nise da Silveira (1981), "Fairy tales bring the rich substances of the psyche's roots to the child consciousness that is being formed." (p. 11).

According to Jung (2000), "Myths and fairy tales give expression to unconscious processes, and their narration always produces a revival and a recall of its contents, consequently operating a new connection between consciousness and the unconscious." (p. 170; OC IX/2: 280).

Sharing this moment of fantasy with the child in a syntonic way, the one that reads or listens validates the child and shows him that he is accepted the way he is. There is a transforming power in the validation that the child receives. This is an experience that repairs and reframes instances of his inner world.

The playful activity promotes integration, individuation and self-awareness, having child's games as supporters in the process of maturation of brain functions. Playing, the child shows how he is, through psychic organization patterns: the child creates, develops, and shows deep feelings, and experiences future roles. Of course, perceptive and creative capacity, and emotional and reliable bonds are developed.

It is from experience, not from the exercise of reason, that children represent archetypal themes in their play. This is one of the initial activities of ego and it is already present in the baby, who performs it from the very discovery of its body. The child plays through the body and, doing so, recognizes limits, expands his movements and takes ownership. Combining the internal process of forming himself and the creation of links with the world that surrounds him,

the child is humanized as a result of the play. The play therapy organizes the content that helps the construction of the self images that each child performs.

### The new role of grandmother

In addition to the self-portraits that were “painted” over my life – wife, mother, child caregiver, and therapist – a newest image comes: mother of children who become parents. The mature woman I became, in the figure of the grandmother of the children of my children. It is the cycle of life that is renewed.

To become a grandmother is the junction of two sides: the woman that ages and takes ownership of her new condition, and the one who accompanies her grandchildren and plays with them in a constant discovery. It is a retelling of what was lived: I am not a child anymore, but I bring my child to life; I am no longer a child's mother, I am the grandmother in the process of discovery of this role. Grandmother and granddaughter – psychic systems that touch each other and that are in an intimate exchange ratio.

Today's image of grandparents reveals other attributes: active people with their own goals, who enhance themselves, through resources and experiences that nurture and give meaning to themselves. All this will be translated into new ways to relate to their grandchildren.

Grandparents introduce ancestry, family tradition, and the notion of continuity of existence, to children. Children are interlocutors to grandparents, who learn from their grandchildren, and also teach them.

For Kipper and Lopes (2006), becoming a grandparent characterizes the fourth process of individuation in the family life cycle, a process of transition between generations: a dialogue between three different generations is established, promoting the development of young people and contributing to the formation of their identity. By looking together at the origins, the perspective of a future to be lived is proposed. In family memory, the affective and intellectual horizon of grandchildren, and the threads of experiences and learning are intertwined in a network: a past, present and future dialogue.

The relationship with the grandchild refers to a past that returns inhabited not as a repetition, but as the quickening of intense and unprecedented emotions, giving new meaning to life, as a rite of passage into a new phase – the rediscovery of my own dormant inner child. As a privileged object of love, the grandchild rescues old experiences and memories.

The cycle of life is dynamic and has its own pace. Both childhood and old age are phases of learning and growth, in which we are invited to participate in exchanges, discoveries and reconstructions in contact with each other. That is how the relationship between grandmother and grandchild might be, even if they are at different stages and use different speeches: both of them dedicate time to play and hear each other.

In mythology we find important references of wonderful grandmothers who appear in myths and stories, displaying different attributes. *Kaos emerges from Gaia, the Magna Mater*, who, as a matrix, conceives all beings. She personifies the base in which all things are supported.

The grandmother as the personification of the primordial goddess can bring the most different characteristics in its representation: there are those distant, who do not devote themselves; those, wearing apron in their kitchens, who turn food into affection and experience; those that inspire; and many others, unique and precious in their roles.

The grandmother is a symbolic representation of the archetype of the wise woman who lived various experiences throughout her life, often as a result of huge failures and losses. Still, it is not something that is done, but a work in progress.

According to Clarissa Éstes (2007), the crucial task of this phase is simply living life thoroughly, according to their own capacity and not according to the references of the other. By living, the other can be inspired and legitimize himself/herself from this experience. All this includes the wisdom to deal with life with compassion and humility, always willing to be open to learning again.

Grandmothers can provide a new listening to their grandchildren, instead of bombarding them with new questions. There is a big challenge to find the right measure. Being close without invading; available if necessary, silently; being able to do things by their grandchildren without usurping the parents' duties, and at the same time, confirming parents in their roles.

How I feel special to be invited by my granddaughters to play. And the plays of the child that I was, vividly come in my mind, making me remember situations, moments and people. By doing so, I become the grandma-child, participating in situations in which parents and other adults are not invited to participate.

### **Puer and Senex**

The soul of a woman may be older than time, but her spirit must be forever young.

A considerable transformation takes place when we become mature - there is an alignment of life: some old egoic concepts give way to a new *Self* that is reborn. We come to realize that we must and can take care of ourselves and quicken our inner child.

While in the first phase we looked at the outside world seeking for achievements, today, in the aging process, we internalize and get rid of conventions. We allow ourselves to listen to the silence, and other perspectives after a long path trodden. We see a road again and now we propose to walk more smoothly. It is the wise solitude without auto-alienation

after the confrontation with ourselves. It is necessary that, through introspection, the voice of *Self* freely acts.

At this stage, *puer* and *senex* archetypes meet, enabling renewal and an expanded consciousness. The archetype of *puer* is connected to the archetype of the child as a symbol of future hopes and new possibilities of life. They are the encouraging, charming and invigorating elements of the human experience. The archetype of *senex* joins the one of the wise old man, bringing reflection and maturity, in another quality of the action, not in the phallic impulses of the hero anymore, but in the stillness and in an inner strength that strengthens and guides.

According to the Jungian analyst Dulcinéia Monteiro (2008), in her book “Puer-Senex”, it is formed a relational axis, vital for the psychological development. We are placed in the eternal cycle of changes and learnings that occur throughout our lives. The child needs to develop the archetypal dynamics of old, such as the limits and weights; and people that age cannot give up the pursuit of spontaneity and creativity.

The richness of *puer* brings possibilities of change and renewal, but the execution comes from the wisdom of *senex*, that gives meaning to all experiences. *Puer* and *senex* represent two opposing qualities of time: the chronological time that devours everything, and *Kairós*, the eternal and non-linear time, the time of opportunity that drives investigation and search. These polarities provide the experience to understand a process that happens over time: beginning, middle and end.

It is crucial to recognize the child within us, his/her needs and feelings. How wonderful is to have our granddaughters to help us in this process! When I began to prepare this text, my 4-year-old granddaughter made a drawing (Figure), depicting a person. I asked her who she had drawn and she told me it was me with curls in the hair. Could there be a more revealing self-portrait of my “granddaughter part”?

And so, following self-portraits of a lifetime, comes at maturity the child's image symbolizing the union of opposites: the child is the mediator, and the one that turns the being into a whole being, allowing a reconciliation with what has already been lived, and an opening for the new experiences that will surely come.

Jung talks about the child as beginning and end, to symbolize the pre- and post-conscious essence of man. He is linked to the state of the unconscious of early childhood and, as a symbol of the future, the child brings a foretaste of the life cycle, an impetus to self-realization, showing paths and possibilities that lead to totality. Thus, the child gathers and reconciles the opposites in himself, also being a symbol of *Self*.



*Figure.* The portrait of a grandmother.

Clarissa Éstes (2007) talks about the importance of becoming a bright flashlight bobbing into the darkness, and illuminate our own way. It is living through the light of our own soul that radiates, also illuminating the footsteps of others.

The attributes that characterize child's archetype renew the continuous and dynamic living force and creative development in the natural cycle of life.

## Final words

Fernando Pessoa (1973), in a sensitive poem, portrays the preciousness of this experience:

The child I was cries on the road.  
I left him there when I became who I am;  
But today [...]

I want to fetch who I was where he stayed.

[...]

If at least I could reach in this place  
A high mountain from where at last  
I could, by seeing it, finally remember what I forgot.



In its absence, at least I'll know of myself,  
And, seeing me just as I was from afar, find  
In me a little of when I was that way.

[...]

An inner child was lost, abandoned or not recognized at an earlier stage, but at this point, he or she needs to be rescued. And thus, when we give attention to it, the new child, endowed with a creative maturity, begins to take shape.

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