Analytical Interpretation of Children’s Drawings:
A Play Therapist’s Overview

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A. Drawings as Expressions of the Unconscious*

- “Jung’s theory of compensation suggests that the unconscious either complements or compensates the conscious, thus always striving for balance.
- When the unconscious content coincides with the conscious world, we say both worlds complement each other. They have a resemblance and they may even reflect each other. They harmonize. Compensation is different, as it implies opposition to the conscious world, and brings about a balancing effect in the psyche. It is often important for the therapist to know the patient’s conscious attitude to understand the compensatory attitude of the unconscious.
- Through compensation, the unconscious may reveal some important factors for the individual to consider and incorporate into his life. Similarly, in drawings it is important to discover whether symbols compensate or complement the psyche.

B. Role of the Symbol in Healing

- A compensatory symbol expresses the neglected area, either in a dream or fantasy or in a drawing, in an attempt to bring it to the attention of consciousness and promote a change in conscious attitude. Thus the symbol has a healing influence, striving for balance and wholeness. A symbol refers to something so deep and complex that consciousness limited as it is, cannot grasp it all at once. In this way, the symbol always carries an element of the unknown and the inexplicable, that which is not amenable to words, and which often has a numinous quality.
- How do we activate the healing power of the symbol? We facilitate the consciousness of symbols in clients by drawing it, writing it in a journal, depicting inner vs. outer realities/worlds through symbols in sandplay and bringing its associations and amplifications to consciousness.

C. 4 Theoretical Premises in Jungian Interpretation of Children’s Drawings

- First, we are open to symbols, knowledgeable of their cultural and personal underpinnings, and accepting of their derivative nature from the unconscious.
  - With openness to symbols, we do not so easily project our own psychology onto others. This projection is dangerous: to come to symbols with preconceived ideas and to believe that another child’s psychology is the same as our own. An open mind is vital to the productive interpretation of symbols and to helping children follow their own bliss, not the path that we think they should take.
  - To discover what may lie at the deeper levels in an individual’s psyche, the meaning of a symbol must be defined in terms of the individual’s own private symbolic language.
- Second, we acknowledge the wounded-healer concept: If I can face my wounds and work toward healing, then I am better prepared to help children face their emotional wounds and work toward healing. We can never accompany children psychologically beyond where we have not traveled ourselves.
- After honoring the presence, significance, and function of the symbol from the unconscious, a third premise is that the symbol must be accepted as a valid method of communication with the unconscious and as conveying its meaning reliably.
A fourth and final theoretical premise is an essential consideration in drawing interpretation—that mind and body are linked. So what the soma needs, the unconscious knows and will lead toward self-healing through symbols and vice-versa.

D. Selected Techniques to Elicit Symbols

- **House-Tree-Person, or HTP (John N. Buck):** A technique designed to aid the clinician in obtaining information concerning an individual’s sensitivity, maturity, flexibility, efficiency, degree of personality integration, and interaction with the environment, specifically and generally.

- **Kinetic-Family-Drawing, or KFD (Robert C. Burns and S. Harvard Kaufman):** This technique is about actions, styles, and symbols appearing as primary disturbances in the individual’s “family.” It was designed for children, particularly troubled children; however, it is an excellent tool for adults as well.

- **The Rose Bush:** may provide projections of a child’s unconscious that is typically used as a projective picture for possible signs of child trauma and/or abuse. Distorted artistic depictions in The Rose Bush alone do not imply nor should clinicians incorrectly assume abuse. However, the Rose Bush may be used as a developmentally-appropriate projective technique in an ancillary or supporting mechanism to a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary psychometric assessment(s) when assessing for child trauma.

- **Serial Drawings:** a series of non-directed and semi-directed drawings over time by a child (perhaps one per weekly play therapy session) to illustrate movement and snapshots of the psychological landscape.

E. Approach to Symbol Interpretation

1. **Know that one does not know.** The three main principles in analyzing symbols:
   a. **Note one’s initial impression of a picture.** One should not interpret the picture as a whole initially but rather concentrate on initial feeling linked to the child’s psychology. The analyst’s impression could be quite accurate and close to the patient’s unconscious world. We do not fixate on a specific decision because of personal associations. Rather, we permit the child’s associations to develop, and thus for the mystery and ambiguity of unconscious contents to emerge.
   b. **The play therapist acts as a researcher.** Looking at focal points systematically is the best way for a therapist to order and direct analytic work; and this systematic approach could hinge on a series of objective reactions to the materials and form of a drawing. Second the size of the paper used should be considered, especially in its relationship to the size of the drawing. If the relationship is off balance, it could indicate a psychic disturbance in the patient and why the drawing of dwarfs or is dwarfed by the actual paper. A sometimes equal valuable consideration is how the drawing is laid out on the paper. Horizontal drawings tend to tell a story and vertical drawings tend to make a statement. The therapist needs to observe what his client could be saying by this logistical placement of drawing on
paper. Focal points, a researcher looks at color, shape, direction of movement, placement, number of repeated objects, and missing items.

c. The third and often most difficult principle in picture interpretation is to synthesize what has been learned from individual components and assemble this information into a whole (without over-reaching). Individuals who are entirely unfamiliar with symbol analysis can begin to understand the makeup of the unconscious presented in the picture by studying focal points. These are basic and by no means conclusive. It is important to remember that no one focal point provides conclusive evidence of what is within a patient’s psyche, and that a series of drawings is a much more reliable indicator of a patient’s psychological and somatic condition. This is because a given drawing most often expresses psychic activity at the point in time in which it is drawn. The therapist and the patient together need to first determine the focal point’s “pull,” its internal “energy” and begin analytic work from there. Because this particular focal point is useful in allowing the therapist to develop a feel for the drawing before being influenced by the patient’s reaction.

What Feelings Does the Symbol Convey?

A symbol communicates a feeling. It is important to capture the initial, spontaneous impression first, and if possible, to encapsulate it in one work—such as “happy,” “sad,” “frustrated,” “fearful,” “confine”—rather than evaluating the picture concretely. Children can also be asked how they felt while drawing the picture concretely. If one finds a conflict between one’s own and the child’s impression, one must not transfer one’s reactions to the child, but rather delve into the nature of his experiences with his picture. Through this process of examining differing or various reactions, the therapist may reach a fuller understanding of the patient’s feelings.

What Is Odd?

A helpful guideline in picture interpretation is to try to discover why some things are drawn in a particular fashion, or abnormally. This odd representation often points out a specific problem area of which the individual may or may not be aware but which needs to be brought into the open.

Barriers

Note that where barriers are within a picture. A barrier is a person, plant, tree, or an inanimate object such as a wall, car, chair, or door. One can see who is blocking whom from communicating, or perhaps begin to discover other barriers, conscious or unconscious, which may exist between the individuals depicted in the drawing.

What Is Missing?

Observe what is absent or left out of the picture. The missing elements may be quite significant to the individual. What they represent of symbolize could possibly be absent from the person’s life.

What Is Central?

Often what is drawn in the center of the picture may indicate where the core of the problem lies or what is important to the individual. The scar is central in the picture. Scars frequently indicate a trauma in the individual’s life.
Size

If things are out of proportion, we try to discover what the excessively large figures emphasize and what the excessively small figures appear to devalue.

Shape Distortion

This may symbolically represent problem areas where more concentration and understanding could help return the distortion to normality.

Perspective

Different perspectives in the same drawings may indicate inconsistencies that may relate to inconsistencies within the individual’s life.

Carry Yourself Into The Picture

The therapist should attempt to become particular objects within the picture in order to feel, hear, and see how they behave, and to better understand their relationship to the whole picture.

Shading

More time and energy are invested into objects or shapes that are shaded than in objects or shapes drawn without shading. Energy invested in shading may reflect fixation on, or anxiety about, what he shaded object or shape represents symbolically.

Compare To The Surrounding World

A drawing needs to be compared with the state of the actual physical world above and beyond what is represented in the picture.

Encapsulation

Encapsulation implies enclosure, the need to draw specific boundaries around oneself, to set oneself aside or apart from others. Since the individual encapsulated is in a protective covering, one questions what he fears, for what reason must he be enclosed, or what is happening around him that encloses him.

Extensions

Extensions are anything that allows individuals to exert greater control over environment. This extension implies either that children see themselves as having control or that they desires more control (complementary-compensatory). And in this effort they may be either successful or unsuccessful.

Underlying

A figure underscored usually indicates lack of grounding (complementary). However, if one individual in a drawing is not underscored and all other figures are underscored, the individual
without underscoring is the steady one (compensation). It is important to keep Jung’s theory of compensation in mind.

**Erasures**

Erasures frequently indicate conflict material or reworked areas of what the symbol represents in life. If the erasure has been redrawn in an improved representrary, if the erased and redrawn material deteriorated, then the represented material has deteriorated as well. If erased and not redrawn, the individual may still be in conflict about the represented material.

**Words In Drawings**

Words used in drawings need special attention. The whole issue of trust comes forth when words appear in drawings. It is also a question of how much the patient trusts non-verbal communication.

**Line Across The Top Of A Page**

A line across the top of a page, such as the sky or just a drawn line could indicate “something” psychologically overhead. This “something” may be a burden to the patient, and the patient may be fearful of carrying this burden. The fear arises over the need to control this burden or the feeling that control may not be possible.

**Transparency**

However, when one sees the frequency of transparency increasing (i.e., seeing through a wall, then through a person, then through clothing, then through skin to the bone structure) and this accompanies the intensity of seeing into a taboo area (e.g., of sexuality), we have both frequency and intensity at a more developed level. This may be a problem of reality orientation, and a situation of denial could exist.

**Translating Color**

Colors can symbolize certain feelings, moods, even the tone of a relationship. Somatic factors having an important effect on the individual’s life will appear in the drawings, and these can manifest themselves in color or via another focal point. Color interpretation needs to consider how the color is used, where it is used on the page, quantity of the color used, what objects or material the color is used on, and the intensity of color displayed. Listed below are some common interpretations of color based upon the psychology and associations of Western culture. Jung attaches as much importance to color and design as to what the images represent.

**RED** = psychologically, it may signal an issue of vital significance, a “burning” problem, surging emotions, surging emotions, or danger. Physically, it may reflect an acute illness-for example, infection or fever.

**PINK** = As a lesser hue of red, it may suggest the resolution of a problem or illness just past, where one now feels “in the pink.” Often it is used for coloring flesh or cheeks to show the “healthy look” that we see portrayed in advertisements for cosmetics.
**PURPLE** = May point to a need to possess or control, or a need to have others control and support. It may suggest a burdensome responsibility, or indicate that one has a “cross to bear.” Physically, it may indicate seizures or a controlling, gripping situation. As the royal or regal color, it suggests sovereignty, spirituality, supreme power (whether taken psychologically or somatically).

**ORANGE** = May reflect a suspenseful situation, especially a life-or-death struggle; it may also indicate decreasing energy or rescue from a threatening situation.

**GOLDEN YELLOW** = May suggest an emphasis on things of a spiritual or intuitive nature; something of great value. The yellowness of the sun may imply life-giving energy.

**PALE YELLOW** = May indicate a precarious life situation

**BRIGHT BLUE** = May denote health; the vital flow of life (“life’s spring”), or energy

**PALE BLUE** = May denote distance, the far away, pale blue sky; a fading away or withdrawing; contemplation.

**DARK GREEN** = A healthy ego and body; growth or a newness of life as in the healing process.

**PALE YELLOW-GREEN** = Psychological or physical weakness; a jading out of life or coming back into life, with the aid of treatment.

**DARK BROWN** = Nourishment; in touch with nature and the terrestrial; healthy

**PALE BROWN** = May denote rot or decay, or a struggle to overcome destructive forces and return to a healthy state

**BLACK** = May indicate or symbolize the unknown. If used for shading it is generally seen as negative, projecting “dark” thoughts, a threat, or fear.

**WHITE** = As the absence of color, may indicate repressed feelings; it may also, after all colors are used, signal life’s completion”*

*Adapted text, excerpts, and references from below sources*

