

RE-EXPERIENCING WINNICOTT'S ENVIRONMENTAL MOTHER: IMPLICATIONS FOR ART PSYCHOTHERAPY OF ANTI-SOCIAL YOUTH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to focus on several theoretical concepts, first developed by D.W. Winnicott, and demonstrate how these may be applied to the treatment of delinquent adolescents within the structure of art psychotherapy sessions delivered through a Special Education Program.

The Special Education Program described in this paper is the Henry Street School, a private, non-profit Junior and Senior High School, where art therapy has been, over the past seven years, the primary clinical treatment modality (Wolf, 1975).

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS AND TRANSITIONAL PHENOMENA

Winnicott's extensive work as both a pediatrician and a psychoanalyst led him to formulate many theories which expanded and modified earlier psychoanalytic concepts.

His paper on transitional objects (Winnicott, 1951) bridged the gap between the study of the psychological development of a child with a focus on the mother-child dyad and traditional psychoanalytic libido theory.

In this revolutionary paper Winnicott discusses the infant's need to experience the mother and her attendance to his biological, emotional and sensory needs as magically created by his own inner experience of these needs. The term "primary illusion" was developed to express this very special quality by

which the line between the child's wish and its fulfillment becomes indistinguishable. This process can only take place when the mother is in tune with her child's needs and provides an empathic experience for her infant or, in other words, when she is a "goodenough" mother.

This illusion that satisfaction of instinctual needs comes from "within" is essential for later emotional health. The infant must be able to weather the turbulence of later, developmentally necessary frustrations and failures by the mother who will not always be able to provide this totally empathic atmosphere.

The breakdown of the illusion thus becomes the fertile ground upon which the child's ability to fantasize gratification grows. This is seen as the precursor of all creative and spiritual experiences. It is also through this process of breakdown of the illusion that transitional objects and transitional phenomena are rooted.

As derivatives of the "primary illusion," these objects relieve anxiety in the absence of the mother and serve to bridge the gap between internal object representations and outer life experiences.

CREATIVITY AND PLAY AS DERIVATIVES OF PRIMARY ILLUSION

Winnicott discusses the relationship of fantasy life and play to the realm of transitional phenomena and arrives at the conclusion that fantasy and play are the first creative responses to minor deprivations and

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disappointment which the child begins to experience as the "goodenough" mother gradually begins to separate from the infant and introduce moderate frustrations. The ability of the child to tolerate these deprivations depends on the mother's capacity to facilitate the "primary illusion" and on her intuitive and empathic ability to moderate and time the frustrations so that they do not overwhelm the infant's still tentative tolerance level.

THE CAPACITY TO BE ALONE

In his study of a later period of child development Winnicott (1958) noticed that as the infant grows, he slowly develops a "capacity to be alone," an acquisition which is determined primarily by the mother's ability to provide an environment where the child can feel safe, nurtured and encouraged to explore the world of the "unknown" as an exciting and challenging world full of "potential."

Thus the term "Environmental Mother" was developed to describe how the mother's attitudes toward independent, creative exploration of the world is internalized by the growing child and then projected out on the "surround" to be felt as a broadened attitude with which one's creative efforts in life are met. This process thus becomes the prototype of creative achievement in later life.

THE PROBLEM OF ANTI-SOCIAL YOUTH

In his paper on *The Anti-Social Tendency* (Winnicott, 1956) Winnicott discusses the dilemma of anti-social personalities as being developmentally fixated at a point after they have experienced an initial period of "goodenough mothering" and have achieved some degree of "primary illusion." He postulates that the anti-social tendencies, be they manifested by stealing or destructive behavior, are an attempt by the child to provoke the environment to respond in such a way that the child may reexperience the earlier lost "love" relationship. It is his view that these actions, as unpleasant as they may be for us to experience, must be viewed as a sign of "hope."

Delinquency therefore springs from a premature withdrawal of the early "love" relationship, sometimes a result of trauma in the life of the mother or child, at other times the result of the mother's unempathic, out-of-tune emotional response. In order for a child to develop normally during this period, the mother must be able to sense how much frustration the

child can optimally tolerate, and respond accordingly.

Winnicott also discusses the difficulty inherent in working analytically with these youngsters as the analyst must be prepared to have "the anti-social tendency develop full strength in the analytic situation, and must be prepared to bear the brunt . . . or else must allow the anti-social tendency to develop outside the analysis." (Winnicott, 1956)

INTEGRATION, SYNTHESIS AND APPLICATION OF CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY WORK

Using the conceptual structure outlined by Winnicott we begin to design our intervention from the ground up, placing a great deal of emphasis on the emotionally "facilitating environment" where the youngsters are encouraged to "play" and explore various art media with vitality, excitement and hopefulness.

Particular attention is given to sensory stimulations — visual, auditory, physical and tactile — all of which influence their experience of the environment.

Art projects are arranged in an ever-changing display, expressing the analyst's (environmental-mother's) appreciation, respect and interest in the creative effort. Music is available and often introduced to help set the mood. The youngsters have access to the selection of music which best suits their particular feelings. Selection of an art medium is often left to the youngster.

There is a feeling of freedom within the external structure. The child may choose to work independently, within the encouraging presence of the analyst, or may work together with the analyst on projects which require interaction. Specific techniques are used to foster an atmosphere of playfulness (Wolf, 1976).

We remember Winnicott's concept that the anti-social youth has experienced "goodenough mothering" at an early point in maturational development but has been traumatized by a premature separation from the love object or an unempathic, out-of-tune emotional response by the love object. What we therefore hope to provide is an environment where the youngster may safely regress and re-experience this early trauma, but this time in a controlled setting and with a more empathic, understanding and encouraging "environmental mother."

For many youngsters this is their first opportunity to experience themselves in such an environment.

They are given a great deal of "freedom to explore" within this personal space, structured in time, frequency and physical limitations, yet offering great freedom within those external limits.

This may be viewed as a recreation of the "potential space" between mother and child, "the creativity-bearing, intermediate region which both joins and separates the mother and the playing child" (Deri, 1978).

The analyst is the "environmental mother" who nurtures, accepts, yet sets limits and even frustrates when appropriate, but always in a gentle way which is empathically in tune with the developing ability of the child to tolerate such frustration.

As stated earlier, Winnicott proposes that an analysis of anti-social youth will lead to expressions of anti-social tendencies either within (through the transference) or outside (through peer relationships) the analytic situation, each alternative having serious liabilities in an "open" setting such as ours (Wolf, 1975).

The introduction of art materials offers yet a third possibility. Here the youngster can feel free to use his creative art experience as an arena for expressing anti-social drives and fantasies which spring from the frustrations which will inevitably arise, frustrations which have at their roots the earlier traumatic loss of primary love object but which will now be recreated in a less traumatic form, by well timed and empathic frustrations by the new "love-object-analyst."

Libidinal impulses, both aggressive and tender may be safely reexperienced and expressed without fear of physical damage (to self or others) or reactive guilt which so often accompanies destructive, acting-out episodes (Wolf, 1978).

The ultimate reexperiencing of these instinctual feelings, along with a growing capacity for symbolization and sublimation, permit the youngster to "work through" and integrate his basic tender and aggressive drives which had been fragmented by the early trauma or disillusionment caused by the premature loss of the love object.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

In viewing the following cases from the perspective described above it is important to think of the therapeutic process in terms of the establishment of the following sequential milestones:

1. Reestablishment of an empathic experience.

2. Establishment of the art experience as a means of symbolic communication.
3. Establishment of a transference whereby the analyst is experienced as the goodenough mother who will alternately nurture or frustrate.
4. Redirection of anti-social tendencies into art work.
5. Recognition of patient's need for time to integrate this experience, the need to be alone in the presence of the "parenting" transference object.
6. Integration of sexual, aggressive and tender drives as reflected in both the art work and the transference feeling.

Case 1

Theo is a 15-year-old Puerto Rican male. His mother was an overwhelmed, ineffective woman who had been hospitalized several times for schizophrenia. Theo had been placed in a group home prior to his admission into our school. We began working together in an attempt to change his "bizarre" behavior which was alienating him from peers and also interfering with his academic progress.

We quickly established a warm, friendly relationship. I encouraged him to draw his fantasies in a special sketch book which I had presented to him as a gift. Within a short time I had created an atmosphere where Theo felt accepted and was able to freely express himself through his creative artwork. The only restrictions I placed on him were in the form of physical limits. He was told that he could say or draw anything he wished, but that he could not physically hurt me or damage anything in my office. Once these ground rules were established, Theo began to bring in drawings to show and discuss with me.

His first drawings were stereotype defense-images of cars and tanks. We began talking of his problems. I empathically expressed how he must feel, being unable to live with his mother, both angry and sad that she was unable to raise him. As we spoke informally of such conflicts, his artwork began to express violent fighting scenes with the "good" fighting the "bad" guys. Then, quite suddenly, the anonymous battle scenes shifted to more personal sadistic and masochistic images (Fig. 1).

This sudden contact with archaic introjects stimulated rapid retreat into "safe" defensive images but then, after several weeks, an important new image

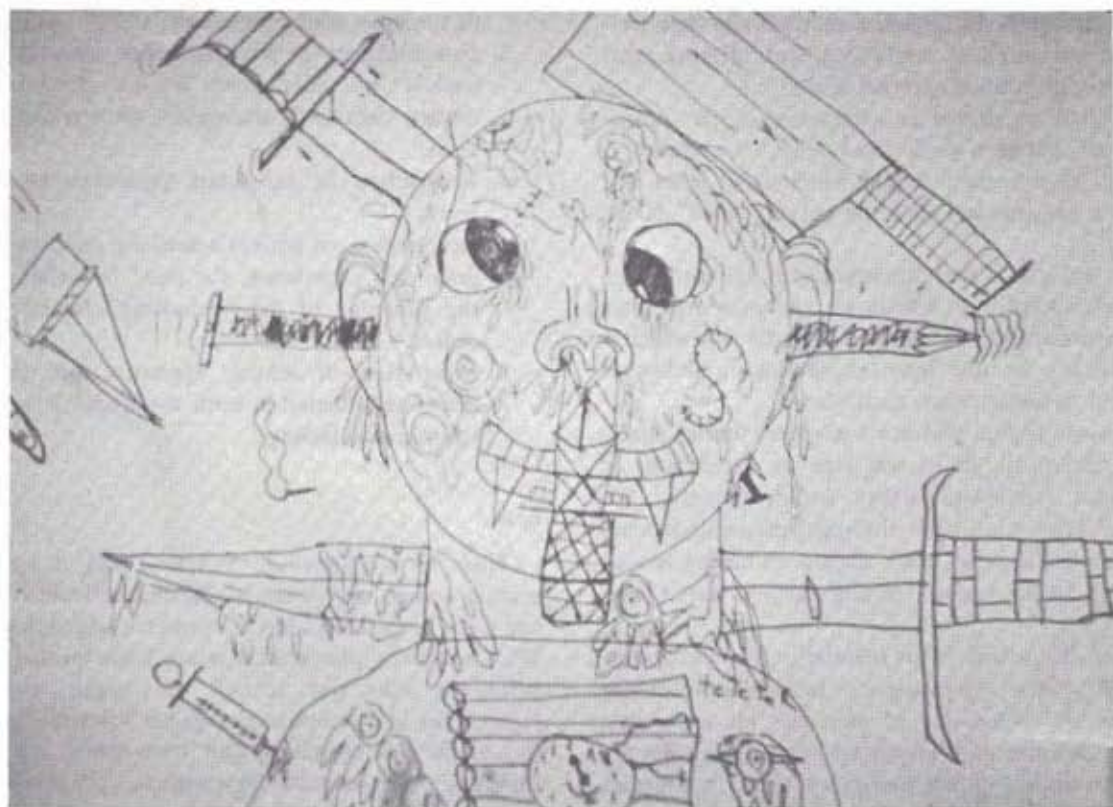


Fig. 1

appeared. This was a sensitively drawn portrait of me. Theo had begun to identify with me, which represented the formation of a new internalized object relationship, one which might offer an alternative to his earlier, destructive internalized object relationships.

What followed (Fig. 2), were a series of battle scenes which suggested a working through of his battle with primitive introjects. We see the monster destroyed as he breaks through from underground (unconscious) to overground (conscious). Shortly after this series, Theo produced an execution scene (Fig. 3) where the "evil" people are finally killed off.

His artwork began to convey a newfound sense of integration. Relationships with peers began to improve significantly. He was no longer seen as "crazy" because his "monster" was now under control. His monstrous, archaic introject had been modified by a more contemporary, empathic one. His final drawing (Fig. 4) conveyed this new level of integration. Theo drew a picture of the two of us working on a Frankenstein monster, in a "controlled" labora-

tory setting, a fitting image for his experience of our work together over the past months where we had externalized his bad objects, thus freeing him from their destructive effect.

The availability of Theo's creative art book facilitated the non-destructive expression of feelings which would have otherwise been impractical to elicit in a more traditionally psychotherapeutic situation. It gave Theo an opportunity to safely express these feelings without fear of harm to himself or others and also permitted him to take distance from certain feelings when they became too overwhelming.

Case 2

Jose is a Puerto Rican male age 18. He was raised by his maternal grandmother. For the first 12 years of his life he had lived in Puerto Rico with his grandmother and uncles, only first meeting his natural mother upon his arrival in New York City, just prior to his admission into our school.

When we first met he was negativistic, depressed

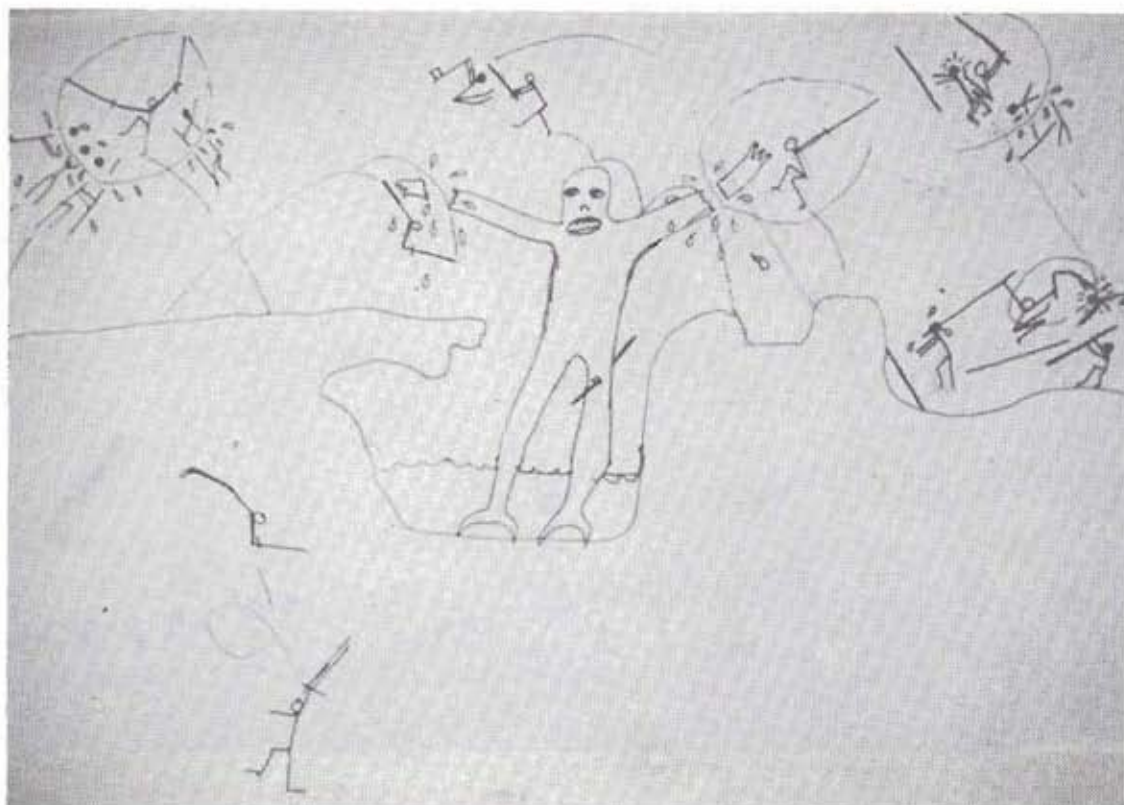


Fig. 2

and often provocative. We were able to provide both junior and senior high school classes for him, so our work together has spanned a period of six years.

We began by establishing a friendly, playful relationship where he felt free to draw or talk about anything he chose. I supplied him with a sketchbook which he carried with him, in symbolic connection to me as a transference figure.

His earliest drawings, (Fig. 5) show diffuse oral-sadistic impulses and the emergence of overt sexual preoccupation. We would talk at length about sexual feelings common to adolescents.

Once I had firmly established myself as an uncritical, empathic person, Jose felt freer to express more intimate fears and sexual fantasies. This experience allowed for an integration of tender and aggressive drives.

After a period of about a year, the transference feeling changed and Jose began to express anger toward me in a cynical, devaluing way. His artwork also began to reflect this shift. In Fig. 6 we see the emergence of Jose's desire to engage in a power struggle with his analyst. This attitude was manifested

in the therapy experience by his announcement that he refused to do any drawing "for you." This marked the beginning of a long period where Jose was permitted to come to sessions and sit silently, sometimes reading or drawing, alone in the accepting presence of his environmental-mother-analyst.

This period lasted several months. Very slowly I was able to mirror back his attitude by playfully taking instant photographs of him scornfully sitting with defiant gestures. Gradually a smile broke through his perpetual scowl. We were able to joke and tease each other more and more as time passed and Jose's artwork began to reflect the emergence of a wonderful sense of humor.

His drawings also continued to express some cynical, sadistic and at times anti-social impulses, but in an ever increasing playful, acceptable and creative way. He had internalized my attitude toward him and here again, as we saw earlier with Theo, this new internalization was able to modify the earlier archaic, destructive, internalized object.

This shift in internalizations and newfound ability to integrate aggressive and tender feelings was graph-

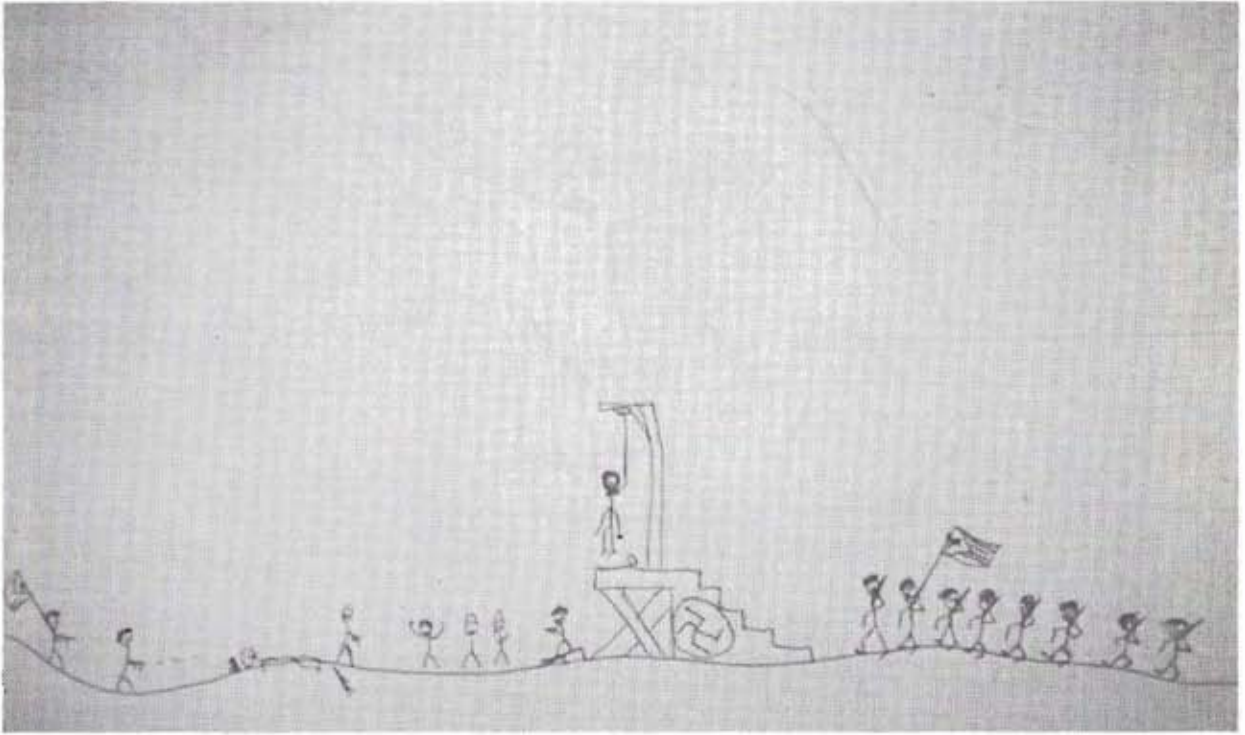


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

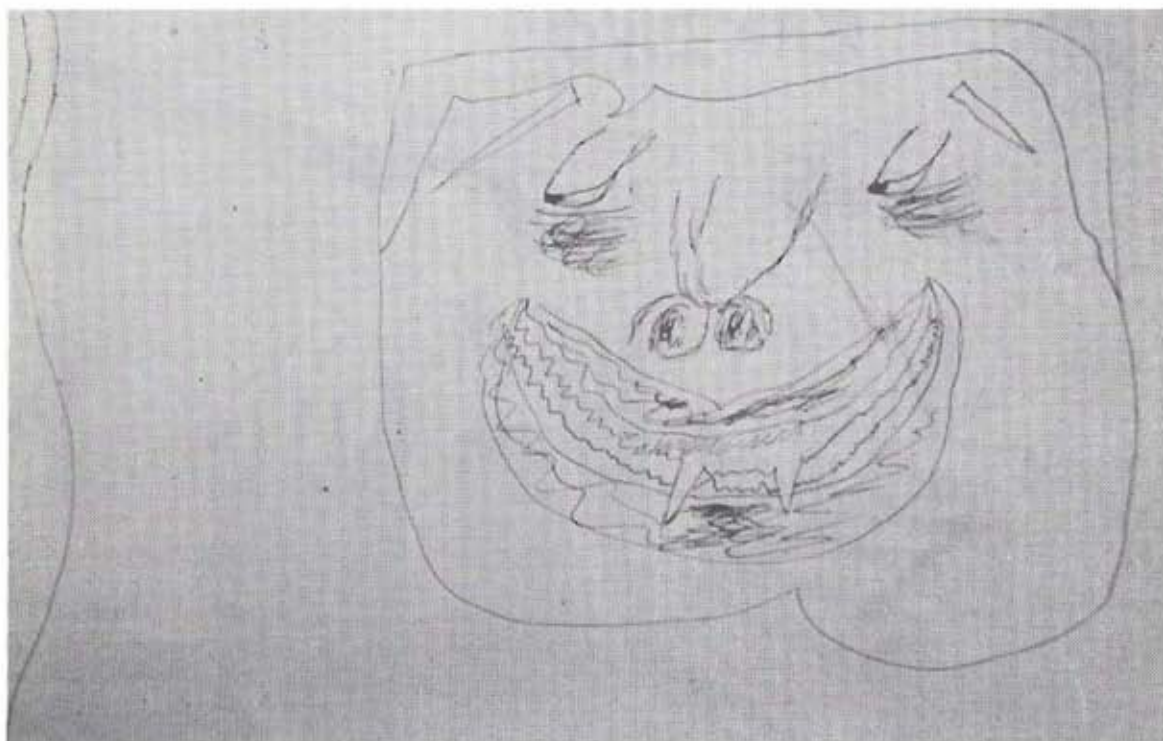


Fig. 5

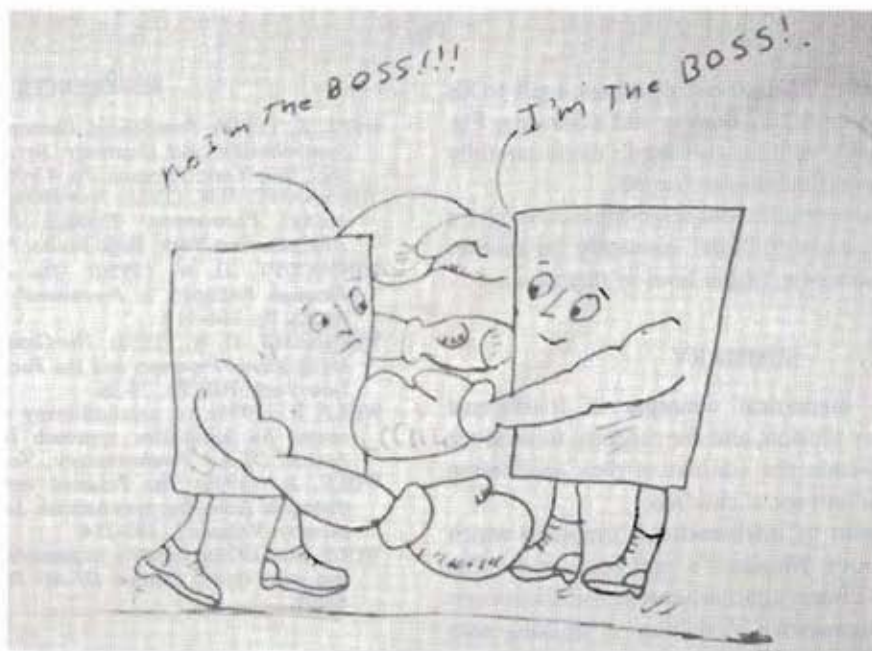


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

ically illustrated in his last two drawings; a gift to his analyst of a fire-breathing dragon, and a drawing, Fig. 7, titled "Caring", with his girlfriend's name carefully written as a three dimensional design.

For Jose, these momentous achievements, to give a gift to his analyst and to "care" genuinely for another person, signified a new, higher level of functioning.

SUMMARY

Winnicott's theoretical concepts of transitional objects, primary illusion, and the capacity to be alone are reviewed within the context of their application to treatment of anti-social children.

A clinical plan of intervention is proposed which draws from both Winnicott's concepts, and other contemporary clinical approaches that use creative art and music as innovative modalities in working with anti-social children in a special education setting.

Two case studies are cited and discussed from a perspective utilizing these concepts.

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