

SANDPLAY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY*

KATHERINE BRADWAY, Ph.D.

Training Analyst

C.G. Jung Institute, San Francisco, California

The method which is identified by several terms including sandplay, sandtray, sandworlds, and sandtray worlds has deep roots. The method as originated by Margaret Lowenfeld is presented in her 1935 book *Play in Childhood*, but she credits her inspiration for the technique to H.G. Wells' 1911 book *Floor Games*. Lowenfeld's "world technique," as it came to be known, was soon included in the regularly used therapeutic methods at the Institute of Child Psychology in London, and was subsequently adopted by clinics in other countries. Unfortunately, its being valued as a therapeutic tool in the United States may have been delayed because a version of it authored by Charlotte Buehler and George Kelley was listed in the 1941 Psychological Corporation catalogue as the *World Test*.

It is Dora Kalff (1971) in Zurich who has made the greatest contribution in developing the method in connection with Jungian analysis. It was mostly through her seminars, first offered in this country in the middle 1960s, and her 1971 book on sandplay that American analysts became interested in the method.

The method consists of inviting subjects to make anything they want in a box of dry sand or a box of damp sand, with whatever things they wish to select from shelves holding hundreds of miniatures of human figures, animals, building structures, vehicles, plant life, sea life, bridges, wells, fences, garden and farm implements, stones, shells, mosaic pieces — whatever the therapist has collected for this purpose. There is no standard collection of miniatures. Each therapist makes up his or her own unique collection

so that the client is interacting with something personally connected with the therapist.

Specific dimensions of the sandbox as worked out by Lowenfeld and recommended by Kalff are to permit the person using it to view it with one glance without having to shift the head from side to side. Conversion of centimeters into inches results in dimensions of approximately 19x28x3 inches. The sides of the box provide boundaries within which a person can present his or her fantasy.

Verbal interaction during the sandplay productions is usually minimal. Since comments about what the client is doing may be disruptive, they are avoided. The extent to which interpretations are made after a scene is completed vary from therapist to therapist. I find that if I ask a few questions to help me understand what is happening in the initial couple of scenes, the client tends to develop a pattern of making a scene and then volunteering what role the various objects play in the completed scene. My commenting on the reappearance of a particular object or of a particular theme usually elicits additional remarks from the client. After a series of five to ten sand scenes, or whenever there is a sense of a coming to the end of a phase, the looking together at projected photographic slides or prints of the series and making connections between the scenes and then between the progression of scenes and other aspects of psychological development contributes to emerging insights.

The making of a scene and talking about it seldom takes up a whole hour session, so the more traditional verbal therapy is not excluded. What the method does

*Requests for reprints should be sent to Katherine Bradway, Ph.D., 41 Monte Mar Drive, Sausalito, California, 94965. Please enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope.

is to provide a protected space where the inner process seems to be more readily activated than in verbal interchanges, and where the circumstances are conducive to a suspension of the ego censor and to a comfortable trusting of one's fantasies. Once a client starts to make a scene, it is evident that he or she is completely absorbed and largely oblivious to stimuli from the outer surroundings. It is similar to a child who becomes absorbed in a play activity. Rarely do adult clients do much moving of the objects around once they have placed them in the box. Remarks such as "I have no idea what I am doing," and "This doesn't really make any sense to me," attest to the activation of the unconscious. And then a point comes when the client stops, moves slightly away from the sandtray and says something like "There, that's it."

Unlike dreams, there is no "third party" go-between. The scene is there, just as it occurred; no verbal description is necessary. And, unlike drawings and paintings, the client is not limited by a self-consciousness about skill as is too often true for conventional art productions where one has experienced being judged in a classroom setting. A few clients resist doing anything with the sand and miniatures, but most are attracted by them. About 80

percent of my adult clients engage in sandplay in more than one session during the course of their therapy with me, but none uses sandplay at every session.

In order to illustrate the method in actual practice, I am going to compare the sandplay productions of two women: one an unmarried woman with a career; the other a married woman without an occupation outside her home. Both were in their late twenties.

Irene, an unmarried nurse, had made some sand scenes with another analyst. Her familiarity with making sand scenes obviated introductory remarks. The scene she made in her first therapy session with me is shown in Fig. 1. She first placed the large piece of driftwood in the middle of the box of dry sand. She then crossed four red arcs from a segmented circus ring over one another on the left, placed a girl on a post in the center, and placed a witch on a higher post to the left. Later she owned both girl and witch as parts of herself but explained that the only feminine side of herself she usually recognized was the witchy side. She added that she had been going to put a boy rather than a girl on the post in the center but then for some reason selected the girl. She made no comment about an Oriental man and woman on the right side near a dog and a boy on a horse. She

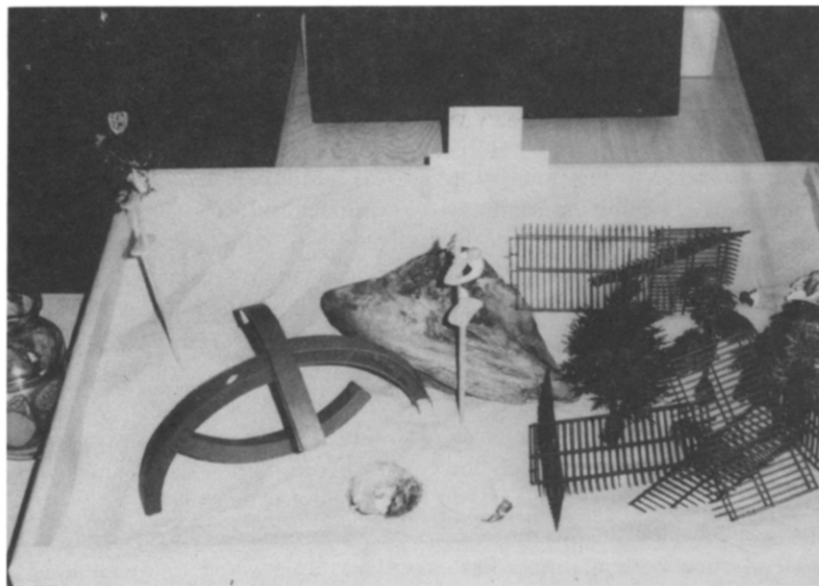


Fig. 1

expressed a liking of the trees, the horse and the dog, saying that she felt good about those "parts." She didn't know why she selected the open oyster shell which she placed at the center front.

In studying the scene later, I realized that it reflected Irene's having unsolved conflicts in the area of femininity, so that her totality, the circle, is broken. The shell, a feminine symbol, shows she has feminine qualities that can be developed. The trees show a potential for further growth, but they are fenced in at this stage and cannot spread. Her problem, then, can be summarized as being a difficulty in dealing with the negative feminine in herself (the witch is on the higher pole) and in bringing things together (the broken circle). The shell and trees represent positive potentials and her liking of the animals suggests a respect for her instinctual side.

In contrast to the initial sandplay production of this professional woman is the initial sandplay production of Isabel, a wife-mother. Isabel's initial sand scene consisted of some trees on the left and a cage inside of a fenced-in area on the right (Fig. 2). There are no humans or animals in the scene. "Because of my mother, I am in the inner cage. My father was never around. I felt rejected." When Isabel observed that she had provided a ramp for the inner cage, she

said, "There is a way out from the center cage." The absence of humans and animals contributes to an impression of starkness and lifelessness. But the trees indicate fertility and potential for growth. They are not fenced in, even though she feels that she is. We might conclude that she has inner potentials but that she perceives something on the outside as threatening and that this has so far prevented self realization.

Both Irene and Isabel continued to make sand scenes throughout most of their analytical work with me, although not at every session. Both of their final scenes depicted a symbol of wholeness: the circle.

Figure 3 presents Irene's final sand scene: the circus ring that was broken up in the initial sand scene is now put together in a whole circle. There are two crossing channels with the ring balanced on top in the center. The figures she placed in the channels were all headed toward the center. She tore paper into pieces to make center walls with doors opening from the channels into the center. After making the rest of the scene, Irene looked over the shelves and finally selected the witch, tied a string to her and attached her to a pole set in sand in the center. She said, "When I came in I didn't know what I was going to do. The only thing that appealed to me was putting figures from different sand tables in the past

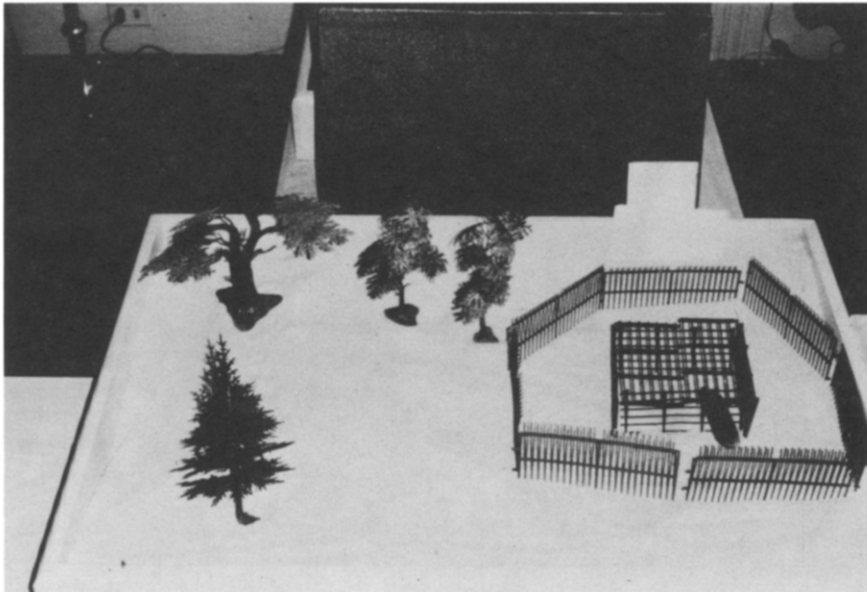


Fig. 2

all coming together. The witch was a final thought. All the rest are coming in there to decide what to do with the witch. The witch is the bad part of me. This seems like regression in a way, and in other ways it seems like pulling it all together. The other figures represent different facets of myself that I have dealt with." When I questioned her about the "bad part" she replied it was the part that still caused her trouble, and added that she left the center "open on purpose — exposed." Apparently she wanted to avoid any cover-up. It deserves noting that the initial and final sand scenes were the only ones in which she used the witch.

Figure 4 presents Isabel's final sand scene. Here too there is the depiction of a circle — in fact two circles. The inner consists of a musical band, a white horse, and an elephant with an ape riding on its back. Another ape is standing with its arm raised toward the riding ape. The outer, less well defined, circle is made up of a warrior on a horse, two clowns walking, men working in the right lower corner, a flower patch, a turtle and a chair facing a fence. Music is generally perceived as connected with the feeling function, and a white horse with the feminine. The carrying of the ape on its back by the elephant reflects a helping or "caring" quality. The warrior

represents Isabel's aggressive side, a potential which had not been present initially. Isabel explained that she placed the fence in front of the white chair at the left "because it looks like a window and I'm looking through the window, and there's a band. Some things are coming and some are going away. There are fast things like the horse and slow things like the turtle. There are serious working people and also clowns." She added that the ape to the side of the elephant was angry at the other ape because it was getting a free ride.

Isabel's pointing out of some opposites caused me to recognize others including happy-angry and feminine-masculine. There were several opposites within the whole. Rather than standing as polarized opposites, they are here existing in a complementary relation to one another in their forming of the two centered circles. The trees and garden plot seem to anticipate further growth. Certainly she has developed far beyond her enclosure in the cage of the initial scene.

Irene made ten sand scenes in her 18 therapy sessions from July through December, so there were eight sand scenes between those shown in Figs. 1 and 3. Isabel made 41 sand scenes in her 49 sessions from July of one year through November of the following

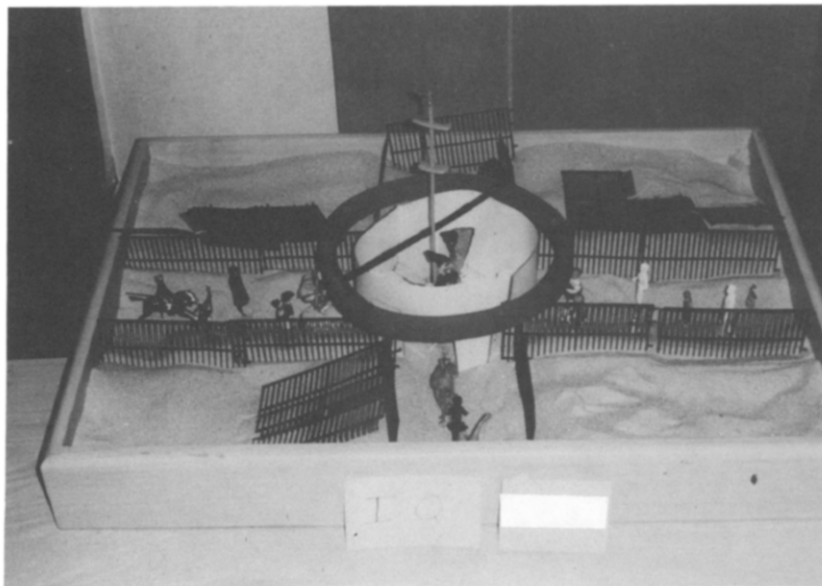


Fig. 3

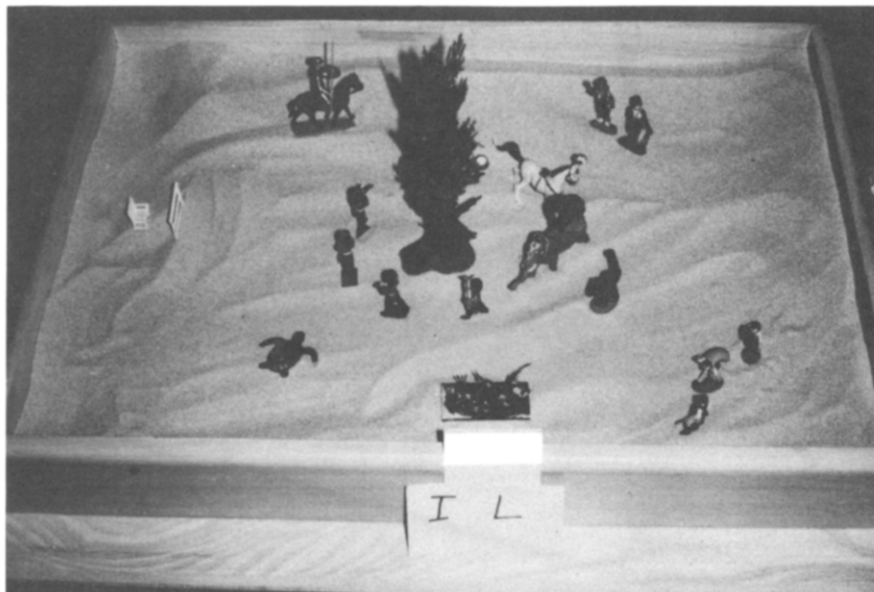


Fig. 4

year: 39 scenes between those shown in Figs. 2 and 4. Both women experienced significant changes in themselves during the period of 6 months for Irene and 17 months for Isabel. At the visit before her final sand scene, Irene said she had been able for the first time to tell the man with whom she had recently started living that she loved him, and had truly meant it. She asked if we could look at the slides of the sand scenes she had made with me. She said she wanted some clinical verification of the development she felt. She was feeling much better about herself. She had lost the weight she had wanted to lose and she was more able to tell people how she was feeling – both positive and negative feelings. But she wondered if she were really ready to get married. So we reviewed her previous nine sand scenes.

At the next session, Irene made what turned out to be her final sand scene. When she came in three weeks later after the Christmas holidays, she told me she and John had announced their engagement. She was married a few months later and terminated therapy.

The eight sand scenes between Irene's initial and final ones show a meaningful progression. One might ask "To what extent do the sand scenes reflect progress in therapy and to what extent do they effect

the progress – to what extent are they the therapy?" I think the creative process is always therapeutic, and that the product of the process may be representative of the stage of one's development. Making sand scenes, like any art production, is a form of active imagination. It permits the emergence of the unconscious into a conscious act and therefore provides the opportunity of integrating additional parts of the unconscious into the conscious. And with each such integration, the person moves forward in his or her growth journey. If one views a series of sand scenes, one sees the movement, especially if one follows the placement of 2 or 3 miniatures that continually reappear, or studies the unfolding of one or more themes, or focuses on what changes occur in one or more "significant" areas of the sandtray.

We have already noted that the witch, which played such an important role in the initial and final sand scenes of Irene, did not appear in any intervening sand scene. But what about the circus ring that was broken up in the initial scene and formed a perfect centered whole in the final scene? And what about the feminine, especially the relationship between the feminine and the masculine?

Segments of the circus ring were used in five of the intervening eight sand scenes. It appeared in three

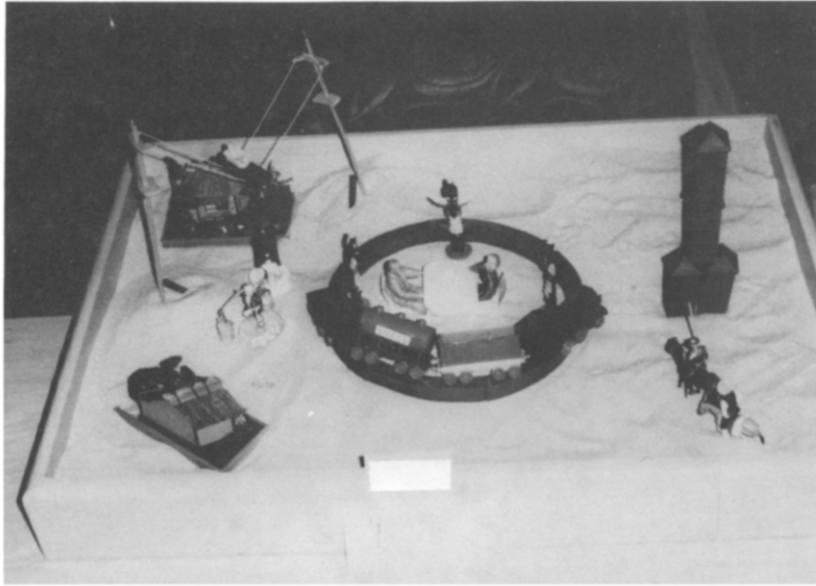


Fig. 5

upright arcs with a woman sitting on one arc in scene 3; as two separated half circles in scene 5; as an uncentered, but complete circle in scene 7; as a partly covered, centered whole with a man and woman sitting at a table in the ring with a shell on the table in scene 8 (Fig. 5); as a complete ring on edge in the background in scene 9 (Fig. 6); and finally as the centered whole with the channels coming into it in scene 10 (see Fig. 3). So Irene continued to use the parts of the ring in varying ways until the final "centering." It is as if the psyche kept experimenting with the symbol of wholeness.

The development of the relation between the masculine and feminine was equally significant. The initial scene suggested a feminine-masculine ambivalence. Scene 3 showed a man who is going to "rescue" a woman and take her to a garden: the masculine is playing the protective role. A shell (feminine symbol) is in the garden. In scene 4 a woman is seated in a shell in the center. Scene 5 and scene 6 showed the feminine and masculine in parallel, but not interacting, relationship to one another. And then in scene 7 the masculine and feminine are journeying toward a bridge together. There is danger, but it is expected that the light will safely direct them. In scene 8, as indicated above, the man and woman are both seated in the center of a full, partly

covered circle with the shell between them on a table. In scene 9 (see Fig. 6) a man coming by boat on the left is going to climb the center pole to get the shell and take it to the woman standing by the well on the right so that they can put the shell into the well where "it will be safe." And in the final scene there is an intermingling of feminine and masculine with the mutual task of dealing with the witch. The sequence seems to show a development from ambivalence regarding role through the stereotypical man-woman relationship to a differentiated, cooperative relationship. There is a development of Irene's positive feminine and masculine sides and the potential for dealing with her negative feminine side. Wholeness is achieved in the process.

The 39 sand scenes between Isabel's initial and final sandtrays also showed a meaningful progression. A week after Isabel's initial sand scene, shown in Fig. 2, she was able to introduce the human figure omitted from the initial sand scene. She placed four walls around a woman in the lower right corner where she had put the fenced-in cage in the initial scene. She also introduced the first of many authority figures, a king in the lower left corner. And the first of several representations of a circle appeared: 9 Oriental figures circling a post on a mound in the left side of the tray. A bridge over a trough right of center



Fig. 6

provided a connection between the two sides seemingly anticipating that the route to wholeness required approaching or coming to terms with authority. Many of the subsequent 16 scenes included some form of authority figure, e.g., priest, royalty, guards, police, soldiers; and depicted women enclosed, controlled, judged, trapped.

In scene 3 (Fig. 7) Isabel placed a bridge in the identical spot in which she had placed it in scene 2. This kind of repetition often happens: a miniature of symbolic significance is repositioned in an identical location as if the psyche needs to reinforce an initial statement — here, that there is a connection which can be found between the two opposing sides or parts of one's psychic world. Now in the lower right corner appeared soldiers with guns, and the king formerly on the left side was replaced by the benevolent authority of church and priest. Studying the changes in specific areas of successive sand scenes yields valuable data as to what course psychic growth is following. The changes in the two lower corners here might reflect, or anticipate, the two developments which can reduce the psychological distance between the oppressed and the oppressor: an increase in the sense of assertiveness of the former and an increase in the sense of benevolence from the latter. This holds, of course, regardless of the extent to which the judger resides in our outer

or in our inner worlds. Another important symbol which is to reappear many times makes its initial appearance in this third scene: a devil figure. "I think of him (the jester figure on stone left of rear center) as a devil." This was the forerunner of a theme which threads its way through the progression of sand scenes: good vs. bad. Differentiating between good and bad precedes an integration of the two. Seeing good and bad as polarized opposites is a prelude to sensing them as complementary opposites. Moreover, the introduction of the devil figure by Isabel must reflect, or anticipate, the recognition of her own shadow, which is a vital step in the safe development of assertiveness and aggressiveness.

The priest and devil continued into the following scene which revolved around a baby buried under a mound of sand in the center. Babies often appear in sand scenes, as in dreams, when growth potential is high. A baby may also represent a Self figure. The fact that it is buried may throw light on the dynamics of Isabel's psychological struggle. Embryos may be perceived as "buried" in the mother. And if one doesn't free oneself from the mother, one may still feel "buried." Perhaps at this time Isabel doesn't have access to a Self archetype because it is still under the domination of the mother.

The fifth scene (Fig. 8) was one of the several

judgment scenes. A young woman is in a cage before a king or judge who, with a jury of 12, is passing sentence on the girl (in photograph the cage is set aside to show the girl). This girl has three choices: be shot, repent, or find a way out of a maze represented at the top right. Soldiers are placed to shoot into the lower right. To inquiry Isabel replied that the girl was not guilty even though so judged by the judge. An ego is standing firm.

The next 12 scenes continue to deal with the themes already introduced in addition to portrayals of isolation and difficulty in communication. In one of the scenes of the latter, a break in a pathway was likened to a break in communication.

In scene 18 Isabel introduced the witch figure and immediately volunteered, "That's my mother." Two bulls were headed toward the witch. It took six more scenes to introduce the witch again, also identified as her mother "on top of a tree" with herself in a fenced in area in the middle of the tray. Two scenes later her mother appeared in the form of a giraffe "peeking over a wall." Her father was presented in the same scene as a camel, and she commented "barren emotions." This was the last time reference was made to either parent until four visits before the final visit.

Many of Isabel's scenes showed the opposition of good and bad, animate and inanimate, ideal and reality, religious and pagan, violence and tenderness. Both death and birth were represented. Bridges and other connections between two or more parts of a scene continued to appear. Moreover, there was increasing interchange between figures at the same time that fighting and violence, which had at first shown escalation, began to decrease and competition in the form of sports and athletic events began to increase.

The several threads intertwined and seemed to culminate in the scene fifth from the end in which a priest was giving the "last rites" and a woman diver was about to dive into a pool. Isabel volunteered that she had no idea why, but she felt that the woman had been brain-washed. In retrospect I think this scene may have represented the death of her overly dependent self. This may have been related to the buried baby in scene 4. At the beginning of the session following the scene of the last rites Isabel announced "I had a confrontation with my mother." Finally she had been able to communicate and be assertive with the one person by whom she had felt most judged, most trapped, most controlled. A concern for balance



Fig. 7

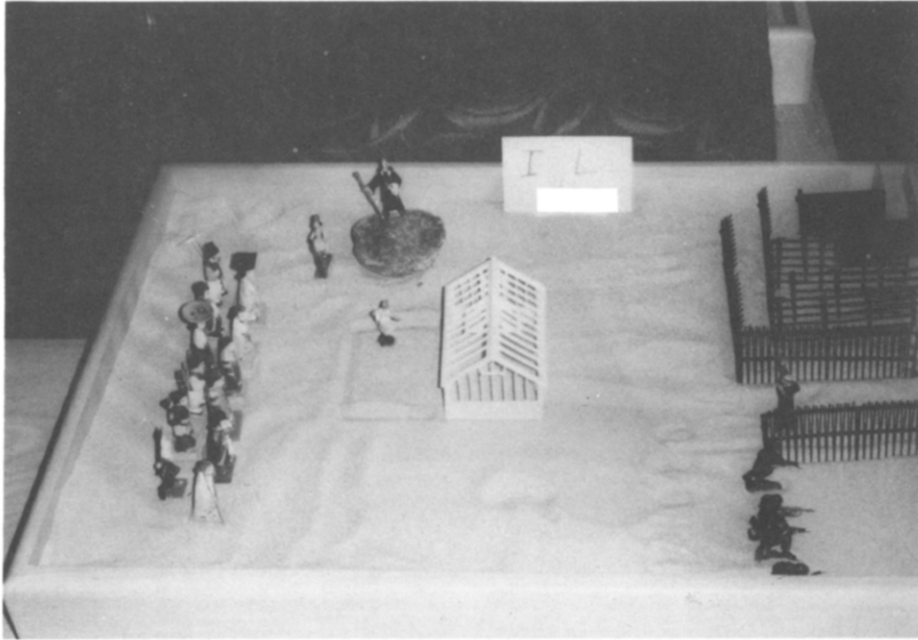


Fig. 8

was emphasized in the following scenes, and then came a scene with a bridge between a princess and her father, and finally the scene in which wholeness with integration of opposites replaces the blocking and earlier conflicts (see Fig. 4).

In addition to comparing the initial and final sand scenes of these two women, we can now compare the courses their therapeutic journeys took.

A witch, or negative feminine, played a significant role for both. But it was identified as being internal by Irene and external by Isabel. Both had need of a stronger ego: Irene, to handle her own negative feminine power; Isabel, to avoid being trapped by the power of her mother. It is noteworthy that Irene felt her "break-through" when she was able to express positive feelings (to fiance), and Isabel felt hers when she could express negative ones (to mother). These were turning points in their therapies.

For both women a positive relation between the masculine and feminine was important. Irene showed ambivalence regarding her own gender role, and it was necessary that she make a clear-cut separation between the masculine and feminine and then let a relationship evolve, as is reflected in the sequence of her sand scenes.

Isabel needed to come to grips with masculine authority and proceeded from helplessness with it to an archetypal relationship in which a royal father and daughter are connected via a bridge. It was after this scene that the final scene of two circles was produced.

So these two women started out at different places of imbalance — in a sense, opposite places — and progressed to similar balanced places. The sandplay provided a means for living out their journeys. It also provided the opportunity for making permanent visual records of these journeys which facilitated studying the therapeutic progress of each and comparing the two.

REFERENCES

- BUEHLER, CHARLOTTE and GEORGE KELLEY (1941) *The World Test. A Measurement of Emotional Disturbance*. New York: Psychological Corporation.
- KALFF, DORA M. (1971) *Sandplay: Mirror of a Child's Psyche*. San Francisco: Browser Press.
- LOWENFELD, MARGARET (1935) *Play in Childhood*. London: Gollancey. (also 1967, New York: Wiley.)
- WELLS, H.G. (1911) *Floor Games*. London: Dent.