

## The Transformational Symbolism of the Skeleton as a Meaning of Rebirth

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### <Abstract>

In this study, the researcher considered the symbolic meanings of the skeleton in Korean folk tales, and analyzed how the skeleton has been developed into a symbol of rebirth in art, heritage, and religion. Also, the researcher interpreted the symbolic meaning of the skeleton, which appeared in the client's sand-picture, through the lens of analytical psychology. Mankind, from ancient times, has connected the death of unconsciousness as a cooperator of salvation in moments of exhaustion, crisis, and desire in the conscious life. The appearance of the skeleton in tales and rituals represents not the end of life but rather coexistence with death, which cannot be detached from life. Through sandplay therapy, the researcher desired that the client solve the fear of meeting the unconsciousness that represents death, and encounter the archetypal meaning of the skeleton that exists in the client's soul.

*Keywords* : symbol, skeleton, transformation, rebirth, sandplay therapy

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## I . Introduction

For modern men and women, who enjoy highly advanced conveniences, death is something to be dreaded. It is something they want to avoid. This may be due to their innate predisposition to fear death, and the struggle to escape it. The fact that death is inevitable and that no one can ever “experience” it beforehand exacerbates the fear. Such underlying fear causes them to force themselves to forget death and misguidedly act as if they possess eternal life.

One can be freed from the fear of death by recognizing death as the opposite of life and loving his or her present life. Perhaps that is why people visualize death through arts and rituals. The symbolic representation of death, from an analytical psychology perspective, is transformation and rebirth.

*The psyche itself is a unique and direct experience, a prerequisite to the reality of the subjective world. The psyche creates symbols. The basis of symbols is unconscious archetypes, and the forms through which symbols are expressed rise out of representations acquired by the conscious. Archetypes are numinous components of the psyche and possess a type of independence and special energy. Through this force, archetypes are able to draw befitting contents of the conscious. Symbols play the function of the unformer (Jung, 1985/2006, pp. 111).*

The skeleton, a symbolic image of the unformer, immediately conjures up an image of death. But the skeleton does not only represent death; paradoxically, it brings the symbolism of the unformer into life. And through such symbolism the skeleton presents abundance and rebirth in the realm of life (Cho, 2013).

In sandplay, skeleton figures-representations of death-can be experienced as symbolic of rebirth through transformation. Such symbolism can also be found in the Bible as the work of God, that is, the Self archetype:

*The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, ‘Son*

*of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘Sovereign Lord, you alone know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’ This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life (Ezekiel 37:1-5 New International Version).*

The skeleton is spirit that has separated from the body; a medium that connects life and death, and the conscious and the unconscious. The objective of confronting the unconscious is to undergo transformation, which connotes the power to depart from the old and to have the skeleton become the symbol of rebirth.

This paper explores the skeleton as a symbol of transformation in Korean folktales and myths, and how it has developed into a symbol of rebirth in various cultural heritages, arts, and religions. It also interprets the skeleton’s symbolic meaning in clients’ sand pictures from a psychoanalytic perspective.

## **II. The Symbolism of the Skeleton**

### **1. The spiritual meaning of the skeleton and the manifestation of symbols**

The dictionary defines the skeleton as the “remaining bones of the body or the head after the decaying of the skin (Lee, 2003).” Sometimes it is used informally in Korea to refer to a pensive head, or an emaciated body. In this paper, the word “skeleton” will be used to widely define the bones forming the framework of the body as well as the head.

Thinking of death while exploring the meaning of the skeleton is perhaps natural. Early humans believed that the skeleton bridges life and death. In African countries it is a common sight to witness people offering skeletons or skulls on an altar and praying to deities during rituals. In addition the skeleton is believed to possess the spiritual power of the dead and thus is used for sorcery or healing purposes. Historical records also reveal that drinking water contained in a skull was thought to cure epilepsy. In ancient civilizations the skeleton had a meaning beyond that of just the bony framework of the dead.

The skeleton began to be used as a symbol of death in the West after the 15th century. Before then people considered death as *homo totus*, in other words, sleeping man, believing that the dead were in a state of prolonged asleep, with the body and the soul becoming one (Cho, 2013). They perceived the decaying body as the dissipation of the soul. Perhaps these believers dreamed of waking up after a period of slumber, or rebirth.

The Middle Ages introduced the idea of separating the soul and body; though the body may decay, the soul would be immortal. As people began to have a firm belief in this concept of “body-soul dualism,” they became aware of death in a real sense (Moon, 1999). Macabre works appeared around this time. People carved their decaying selves on their own sarcophagus, which signified their humble confession of their sins before God (Jin, 1997). And when the Black Death spread across Europe, death began to be expressed as dancing skeletons through the artistic genre of the Danse Macabre, or the *Dance of Death* (Wunderlich, 2001).

After the Dance of Death, skeletons often appeared in paintings under the theme of vanitas. The Latin word means “vanity” and, loosely translated, corresponds to the meaninglessness and the transient nature of earthly life. In this genre the death image was often painted together with the symbols of wealth, fame, literature, art, pleasure, and vanity so as to deliver the message that one ought to realize the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits and take time for self-reflection. There are various representations drawn together with death: a crown, jewels or other valuables for wealth and power; books, musical



Figure 1. Danse Macabre  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danse\\_Macabre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danse_Macabre))



Figure 2. Vanitas

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento\\_mori](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_mori))

instruments, sheet music or sculptures for literature and art; pipe tobacco for pleasure; and mirrors for vanity. Objects particularly used often were the opposites of the death symbolism—clocks, flowers and candles that represent the finite nature of time (Cho, 2013).

*Memento mori* is Latin for ‘remember death.’ The phrase, which originated in medieval times, still percolates through modern culture and arts, though how it is portrayed has slightly changed in tune with the times. It can perhaps be said that the struggle to live a better life led to an active contemplation of death. The issue of death ultimately leads to a reflection on life, and thus has been an inevitable theme of arts. Visual arts, especially painting, have given birth to numerous symbols of death while expressing mankind’s contemplation of death, but nothing has been more effective than the skeleton. The skeleton is both the medium that directly alludes to death and the common image of human destiny. Some may say that medical advances have made even death unfair but in the end, all become the skeletons and ultimately particles that scatter in all directions. This is the very reason why mankind is nothing but a part of nature.

As mentioned above, the primary symbolism of the skeleton is death. Yet for ancient Aztec and even modern Mexican tribes, it symbolizes fortune. Images of the skeleton were also used in honorable religious ceremonies. During the Mexican holiday the “Day of the Dead”, many skeletal decorations are used to honor the dead. On this day the dead would take a break after four years of practicing asceticism in order to enter the underworld. And to support

their spiritual journey, the living would dress up in the skeleton costumes and hold ceremonies decorated with skeleton-shaped candles. As Mexicans consider death as not just a misfortune but also an ultimate state of liberation, many positive images associated with the skeleton can be found in Mexican culture.

Today the image of the skeleton is used as a warning sign. The skull-and-crossbones symbol is recognized as representing poisonous substances or even the Jolly Roger, the flag of the pirates. Also in the early 19th century, the Turks erected the Skull Tower from the skulls of dead Serbian revolutionaries to celebrate the successful suppression of the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire. Now the tower serves as a symbol of the heroic yet tragic struggle for Serbia's independence (Cavendish, 2009).



Figure 3: Jolly Roger  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jolly\\_Roger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jolly_Roger))

## 2. The skeleton as the symbol of transformation

*The process itself is shown through other types of archetypes-what people commonly call the archetype of transformation. These are not personalities; rather they are typical situations, locations, means or methods that symbolize the method of transformation that fits the given circumstances (Jung, 1984/2002, pp. 151).*

The picture of the “Philosopher’s Tree” below depicts a tree growing from the head of Eve, whose finger is pointing towards the huge skull. The alchemical process is related to

the anima's sexual aspect in men and to the animus' head function in women, according to Jung (1984). The raw material of the unconscious is represented as anima in men and animus in women, and it is from this raw material that the philosopher's tree grows. Images of the masculine hero that appear in women's dreams or free associations are the animus, which gradually transforms and resolves the autonomous complex. Jung referred to the rear part of the cranium as a "vessel of transformation" (Jung, 1985/2004, pp. 65), and that the part that contains the brain is where rationality and soul connect and turn into intelligence.



Figure 4. The Philosopher's Tree  
(Jung, 1985/2004, pp. 66)

*The initial form of void is the skull. According to past conceptions the head of the brain is the shelter for the intellectual psyche. Therefore the vessel of alchemy must have a round shape like the head, and thus what is created from the vessel can also be round, that is, simple and whole like the anima mundi (Jung, 1985/2002, pp.113).*

The goal of confronting the unconscious is transformation. If no transformation occurs, the unconscious would continue to wield an unchanging amount of influence and people would be unable to ease neurotic symptoms despite analysis and self-understanding. According to Jung (1985), many of those who do not fall into the category of neurosis have "a skeleton in the

cupboard,” or “residues” of chaos. People have become so adapted to their difficulties or problems that they find them insignificant for the clarification of meaning. The “skeleton in the cupboard” would appear in one’s dream in the form of association and play a transformative role. This is precisely why it is important to explore the skeleton as a symbol of transformation.

The skull’s symbolism of transformation can also be seen in a well-known Korean Buddhist legend of Venerable Wonhyo<sup>1)</sup>. In 661 AD he and a close friend were traveling to Tang China, where they hoped to study Buddhism further. In the middle of their traveling, the pair was caught in a heavy downpour and forced to take shelter in a cave. During the night Wonhyo awoke desperately thirsty, and in the darkness reached out to grasp a gourd filled with cool, refreshing water, which he gratefully drank. Upon waking up the next morning, however, Wonhyo discovered much to his amazement that the vessel from which he had drunk was a human skull full of filthy rainwater. Appalled, Wonhyo vomited. Startled by the experience of believing that a gruesome liquid was a refreshing treat, Wonhyo was astonished at the power of the human mind to transform reality (Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism 2015).

The skeletons are portrayed as a medium for transformation even in old Korean folktales. “The Transforming Skull” is a good example: One day, a man witnessed a fox transform into a beautiful woman by wearing a human skull over its head. He stole the skull from the fox and discovered that the skull had the power to transform anything into a beautiful woman. He therefore put the skull over a dog’s head and walked home together with her. When the man’s wife caught sight of them together, she was infuriated, thinking that he had taken a concubine, and became bedridden. Only when the husband explained what had happened did the wife become relived and forgive him (Park, 1987).

The theme of transformation through the human skull can also be found in the folk tale “Lee Sun-pung and the Fox”: Lee Sun-pung was a middle-aged man of iron will. One day when he was working in the fields, he heard laughter coming from a cave under a hill. Curious, Lee looked inside to discover an old fox grinding a human skull on a rock to fit its

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1) A Buddhist priest (617-686) who is considered the greatest of the ancient Korean religious teachers.

head. Remembering the story that an old fox can transform itself into various forms by wearing a human skull, Lee silently watched the fox in action. After a good while, the fox fitted the skull over its head. When it emerged from the cave, the fox transmuted itself into a fine old gentleman. The old man began to walk down the hill and Lee followed him at a distance. The old man reached a village, and as soon as he entered, the entire neighborhood began to suffer from a mysterious disease. The old man began to spread the word that he was the only one who could cure the disease. People began to come to the old man for help and miraculously he cured the sick just by touching them. Because he demanded large sums of money for his treatment, however, only the rich were able to afford it. In only just a few days the old man was able to rake in the entire village's fortune. Lee, who knew everything, was determined to kill the fox-turned-man. Thus one day as the old man was leaving a patient's house, Lee stabbed him with a knife. The old man turned back into a fox with 99 tails and ran away (Jin, 1992).

The fox is a byword for transformation in traditional Korean tales. But what is peculiar in the above mentioned story is that the fox was transformed by wearing a human skull over its head, whereas in typical Korean tales it is typically achieved by doing a somersault. And the fact that other animals like the dog were also able to transform themselves leads us to conclude that the transformative power belongs to not only the fox but also the skull. The skeleton allows the fox to understand and accommodate its innate transcendental capability to transform. The fox is no longer a transformative being, but a medium that delivers the skull with transformative power to mankind.

These traditional stories show a change in the perception of the transcendental ability to transform. Symbolically, the stories represent the idea that even humans are able to obtain the capability to transform through skulls, or skeletons, which foretells the manifestation of consciousness that differentiates the realm of surrealism from the realm of reality.

*People cannot transform with reason and rationality alone; they are able to transform through the Self archetype which is an innate potential. When transformation is inevitable, the gradually-collapsing coping mechanism that was at work so far would be compensated unconsciously through the archetype of a different form of coping mechanism. When the conscious becomes activated*

*and successfully interprets the given archetype, in its meaning or in a time-appropriate manner, only then transformation with a sense of vitality will occur (Jung 1985/2006, pp. 118).*

### 3. The skeleton as the symbol of rebirth

*The skeleton's primary symbolism is death. But it does not just stay in the death symbolism. Paradoxically, the skeleton presents abundance and rebirth to the realm of life; in other words, concealed also in the skeleton is the symbolism of rebirth. One common theme in traditional Korean folk tales is the theme of the skeleton returning the kindness of men. The message of such tales is that the power that drives the death symbolism to transfer to the secondary symbolism of abundance and rebirth lies within the living. The skeleton, which enters life as a personification of death, connects life and death as well as enhances life, and such paradoxical cognizance of death are well portrayed in the Korean folk culture (Cho, 2013, pp.317).*

The secondary symbolism of rebirth and abundance functions at a deep, metaphorical level. A theme that often appears in old Korean tales, passed down from generation to generation, is the skeleton repaying a person's kindness. The symbolism of rebirth in these stories appears through mankind's desire for a prolonged life, and abundance is realized by the skeleton's compensating for what is absent from the protagonists' lives. These stories have been passed down from generation to generation in the form of folklore. The idea that the skeleton should not be treated carelessly is an expression from the collective unconscious that death ought to be respected.

An interesting tale titled *Imjangokgohaemyeongbo*<sup>2)</sup>, literally meaning "the story of a skeleton that repaid kindness," has the theme of a skeleton returning an act of kindness. As the title itself suggests, the story is of a Confucian scholar who found an abandoned skull on his way to the capital to take the state examination. He dug a hole and buried the skull properly, and the skull repaid him by enabling the man to win first place in the examination (Jeong, 2005)

Another story of this theme that is still passed down orally today is "The Man Who

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2) A story found in *Cheonyerok*, ahistorical story book compiled by a civil official named Lim Bang at the end of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897).

Got Married After Burying the Skull of Hong Jang-goon.”<sup>3)</sup> The story starts with a maiden declaring that the man who writes the finest poetry will become her husband. A bachelor, who wishes to get married, finds Hong Jang-goon’s skull, which was drifting down a stream and buries it properly. As a way of repaying him, the spirit of Hong gives the man the ability to write excellent poetry and he is able to marry the maiden (Cho, 2013).

Another Korean folk tale, which originated from Jeju Island, is “The Skeleton That Repaid Kindness.” A man named Sosaman went into the forest to cut wood and found an abandoned skull on the ground. He took the skull home and enshrined it in a pot, and the skull repaid his kindness by extending his life from thirty years to 3,000 years.

In all aforementioned stories the protagonists—a scholar who hoped to pass the state examination, a man who wanted to get married, and a man who wished to live longer—unanimously shared the want of something lacking in their lives, whether it was small or big; they desired to fulfill their needs.

Death is a universal symbolism of the skeleton in all human cultures. We often notice skeletons becoming a symbol of life—the opposite of death—as was the case in ancient hunter-gatherer societies. Then the skeleton was considered a place where the soul indwelt. Nevertheless, more fundamentally it symbolizes death. But the common theme in the above mentioned Korean folk tales is that the skeletons were all abandoned and not taken care of for a long time. The message of the skeleton stories is that skeletons should not be neglected. In other words, the stories reflect the idea in the collective unconscious that death should be well taken care of. Having a sincere attitude towards death is connected to having a good communication with the spirit.

What do ancient cultures say about people’s cognizance of death? This question raises the need to consider two different cases. First is the ancient belief in animal bones expressed in myths or rituals related to animal ancestors, and the other is the belief in skeletons handed down by tribes that have the practice of headhunting (Cho, 2013).

The indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Ainu people of Japan all shared folk beliefs and rituals that considered the bear as a deity, or their ancestors or siblings (Kang, 2007). The

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3) This story is taken from a series of 82 books and three supplements. The research project for these books took place from 1979 to 1985, and the books were published over the period of 1980 to 1992.

Khanty of Siberia, who were once both hunters and nomads, traditionally enshrined bear heads in their homes and worshiped them as guardians. The Ainu, both fishermen and hunters, also brought skinned bear heads home to be stored. The head of the bear was separated from the rest of the carcass and set upon a pole called *ke-omande-ni*, that is, “the pole for sending away.” It was placed among a number of other skulls remaining from earlier feasts. The ensuing festival continued for days until all the bear meat was consumed (Newmann, 1973). These people believed that the community’s sharing of the bear meat and worshiping the specially-placed skulls would allow the spirit of the bear to be reborn through the skulls. It is clear that ancient hunter-gatherer societies shared the notion that animal spirits were born again through the skeleton.

Worship of the skeleton can also be found in an origin myth of the Chinese Wa people: The first Wa originated from a couple who spent their early phase as tadpoles. They later transformed into frogs and then into monsters. They lived in a cave and consumed animals for food. One day they went to a faraway village foraging for humans, and took the remaining human skull home. After that they began to have many children who assumed human form. Thus the couple worshiped the skulls. And right before they died, they left a will for their children to make offerings of human skulls even after their death (Cho, 2006, pp.240).

Another relevant ancient myth is as follows: In ancient times, the sky and the ground were so close to each other that people could not sow seeds to grow crops. Knowing this, the sky deity Meiji informed the people that they would be able to plant seeds in the ground if they offered a human head. Upon hearing this, a man beheaded his foster son and offered his head. The sky soared high up in the air and the people were able to sow.

The skeleton presents the people with fertility in the former story, and good harvest in the latter. These stories are about people’s wishing for fertility and rebirth at the level of the collective unconscious. As mentioned before, ancient hunter-gatherer societies believed in the relationship between skeletons and rebirth. The stories also contain the beliefs that souls dwell in both animal and human skeletons, new lives are formed from these souls, and those who revere them as deities are gifted with new, abundant lives (Cho, 2013).

The fact that the skeleton is part of rituals and our daily lives means that we are continuously in touch with, or in access to, its symbolism: death and rebirth. Such access creates a realistic faith inside our mind. The skeleton bears the opposite of death: rebirth. We saw how it became the symbol of rebirth in folktales and myths as it facilitated abundance and fertility, longevity, and so on. Jung (1985) claimed that ancestors' spirits played a key role in primeval rituals for rebirth. Identification with ancestors or animal deities through spirit meant, psychologically, the union with the unconscious, and it was also the expression of the desire for rebirth. In these rituals, the skeleton served as a channel that connected the world of death to the world of everyday reality.

Catacombs are another example where the skeleton was not a symbol of death but revered as the vestige of the ancestors (Jung, 1985/2006, pp.294). The term was derived from the Greek for "corners in low-lying grounds." It referred originally to the cemetery of the martyr Saint Sebastian, but was extended by the early 16th century to refer to any subterranean receptacle of the dead after Christian underground burial sites were discovered. These cemeteries were usually dug 10-15 meters below the ground. The tunnels, formed both perpendicularly and horizontally, are less than a meter wide and about two meters high and connected to many floors through stairways. The tunnels also lead to wide, room-like open spaces that serve as chambers for teaching believers. Alcoves are also created on the walls of the tunnel in a fixed pattern to preserve the skeletons of deceased brethren. During the period of Roman persecution, Christians used the underground tombs as a hiding place and place of worship. The sites are visited by many Christian pilgrims even today. Worship in a place where the skeletons are preserved identifies the dead with the reborn.

*In a way the church is the hero's grave (the underground burial ground Catacomb!). The believers go down the grave to be born again with the hero. Undoubtedly the implicit meaning of the church is the maternal body. From a tantric perspective, the inner part of the temple is the inner part of the body. And the Adyton, the sanctum sanctorum, was called garbha griha, the place where the seed germinates or the womb chamber (Jung, 1985/2006, pp.294).*



Figure 5. A catacomb  
(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombs>)

The name of the hill where Jesus was crucified was Golgotha, derived from a Hebrew word meaning “skull.” In some Christian and Jewish traditions, the name Golgotha referred to the location of the skull of Adam. Death and sin came into the world because of Adam’s sin, and Jesus saved mankind from sin by dying on the cross. The cross is a symbol of the tree of life, and concomitantly the tree of death. Golgotha, where this tree grew, was a place that bore the idea of rebirth through resurrection.

#### 4. The skeleton in sandplay therapy

*According to Jungian theories the Self is in the unconscious-a place of wisdom-and the central order and principle of personality. The conscious aspect of the psyche is the ego but this is not the personality in its entirety. The ego and the Self are mutually connected and when there is communication between the two, the individual would be able to live a life closest to self-actualization, feeling more balanced and alive. It can be said that sandplay therapy is an effective means to seek for and to create a bridge that can connect the ego and the Self (Friedman & Mitchell, 2007, pp.5).*

In the following section, the skeletons that had appeared in clients’ sand pictures will be analyzed according to their symbolic meanings as described above:



Figure 6. Sand picture 1



Figure 7. Sand picture 2



Figure 8. Sand picture 3

*After playing with sand for a while, he brought a cave figure and buried it. Wondering aloud, "Is there a house?" he looked around the shelf and brought a small igloo figure, which he also buried in the sand. He then unearthed the cave and carefully brushed the sand off it. He fenced*

*the area where a skeleton and a robot were fighting, and covered the entire area with the cave. The Korean flag and the American flag clearly divided the two different areas that were engaged in a conflict. "I think Korea, where Jesus is, is stronger," he said. The modern soldier figures were replaced by medieval-looking knights in armor. Other figures-a beetle and a stag beetle in a fight, a man in a wheelchair throwing a ball, and Luffy<sup>4)</sup> from One Piece-were put in the sandtray but then were later returned to the shelf. The client was having fun by placing the figures of his choice.*

*(From the therapist's observation journal, June 2015)*

Figure 6 was the first sand picture created by a 10-year-old client. He was the younger of fraternal twins and the mother had a cesarean when giving birth to the brothers. Due to the mother's hardship with nurturing two children at once, the client as an infant was often taken to his relative's house to be taken care of. Thus he was hardly breast-fed. The client's main problems, as reported by the mother, were that he was extremely quiet and unfocused, his ability to communicate was behind that of his peers, and he often verbalized incomprehensible words.

In the sand picture above, the psychological tension was maximized with the symbolism of the conflict between good and evil. It could be said that such tension between good and evil was an unconscious representation of a spiritual being that could judge and punish itself in the client's life. The manifestation of the opposites heralds the union towards the Self, the symbol of wholeness. The Self has both light and darkness.

As Kалff said (1989) a client's first sand picture forebodes a deep conversation with the psyche, with whom the client will walk together on his or her journey. The skeleton can be seen in both Figure 7, which is a close-up of the cave, and Figure 8, which is a picture taken without the cave. The right side of the sandtray was where the client created his first work in the entire scene, and it was particularly important as he took the effort to hide the cave under the sand. Silence was kept in the room so that the client would be able to fully concentrate his breathing and movements while doing the work.

The cave is a mother archetype, symbolizing the womb carrying a new life (Ackroyd,

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4) The main protagonist of the Japanese anime and manga, *One Piece*. His lifelong dream is to become the Pirate King by finding the legendary treasure left behind by the late Pirate King.

1993). It is also a symbol of the unconscious. The formations of wooden fences and stone walls in the client's picture are reminiscent of the shape of a womb. Inside the formations, a robot figure that the client called "a strong monster" and a winged skeleton are confronting each other. This scene, which implies conflict and tension that has begun from the womb, contains the process of being born again from the mother from whom the client has not yet separated. In this psychological development, the skeleton-which represents the spirit as a medium between death and life-is playing the role of the unformer. The robot, which was referred to as a monster, had no heart and thus did not feel emotions. The fact that the client portrayed this figure as strong and mighty indicated that it was a heroic figure in the client's fantasy world. The hero was given the task to bring a treasure, namely the Self, from the underground cave. But a robot without spirit is a symbol of inflated ego and thus is not conducive to the manifestation of the Self. The skeleton, seen as a weak being in the picture, is a power of the innocent spirit and foretells the possibility of rebirth.



Figure 9. Sand picture 4



Figure 10. Sand picture 5



Figure 11. Sand picture 6

*The client slowly looked around the shelves and seemed to be deep in thought. He placed his chosen figures very carefully into the sandtray. He gave his full concentration on doing his work in silence. The client pointed to where the horses were circling and said, "The four are standing well... But one horse couldn't stand up and fell so it is being whipped." The client identified two identical female figures as sisters. He explained that they are both fond of the same man, but the man likes the older sister. He then placed various types of human figures around the cave, as if they were protecting it, and elaborated that there was a fight between people and ghosts. The client defined the hierarchy of a cowboy, a swordsman, an archer, a police, and an armed man according to their power. He also ranked the skeleton figures, which he called "ghosts," in a hierarchical order. The client described that the skeleton in the coffin was the "strongest guy" in the ghost world. His explanation [for Figure 11] was that "the two skeletons and the pirates were originally a team, but they began to fight each other while arguing about who got to keep the treasure they had found." He then gave a long description about the different characteristics for each ghost.*

*(From the therapist's observation journal, August 2015)*

Figure 9 was the client's fourth sand picture, made about a month after his first one. This was the first time since his initial sand picture that a skeleton appeared. The client was deep in thought and concentrated without talking, and the therapist was present for him also in silence.

It seemed that the client's implicit memory-from the early days of birth when he was neglected by his mother-and also his unconscious were reflected in the picture. The mother's absence made the world into a world of chaos and nothingness, and others vanished. In the

child's experience, absence and death were equal, and absence made the child's death meaningful. Like it or not, a Great Mother figure who was in a primal relationship with the child was a goddess of destiny who determined life and death, as well as positive and negative developments. Her attitude was a decision made at the highest level, and to the child her absence was equal to an unknown guilt (Neumann, 1973).

Moreover, it seemed that the dysfunctional aspect of his psychological relationship with his twin brother, in other words a competition over the mother's affection, had induced the opposites of good and evil, and of life and death. Neumann (1973) asserted that the collective's attitude towards a child as well as the child's gender, character and development could be a problem of life and death. He also argued that negative judgments of a child's gender, status (e.g., twin), looks, circumstances during birth, and so on by the collective could generate a catastrophe that may prompt physical and psychological disabilities.

The skeleton hidden in a cave in the client's initial sand picture appeared in different places in later pictures. It could be said that the conscious had manifested, separated from the womb. According to Turner, figures are arranged in two groups in the second phase of psychic development in the sandplay process. In this stage of development, pain and deprivation appear as a sense of evil that abandons the mother and the witch. They appear as death and loss-opposites of growth-and, in sandplay, expressed as the client's recognizing the existence of his or her dark aspects. Deep sadness arises when one recognizes death and loss, but becoming conscious of it is part of the growth and development process (Turner, 2005).

Kalff (1989) observed that the symbolic images of the development of consciousness in this stage often have the characteristics of a fight. At this point in time in psychic development, the ego separates from the maternal energy of the unconscious. The client's sand picture contained people and ghosts-opposites of life and death-and a fighting scene between the skeletons and people, who represented evil and good respectively. The fight, which was dominated by the principle of power, played the role of a harbinger in the pre-conscious development level. The difference between the initial relationship phase of pre-conscious development and the fighting stage of ego development is that the conscious appears in the form of opposites in the latter stage (Turner, 2005). When evil is able to perceive good, one is fit to enter a stage of psychological transformation where he or she is able to entirely

recognize and unite the opposites. When life, symbolized by people, encounters death, symbolized by the skeleton, their difference is finally acknowledged. An indispensable element in this development stage is the manifestation of consciousness.



Figure 12. Sand picture 7

*The client selected a tray with white sand and carefully touched the sand. She smiled shyly at me from time to time. She took her time observing the figures and placed them one by one into the tray. The area with the Jesus figure was heaven, she explained. She commented that it looked as if a marriage ceremony was being held in heaven. The opposite side represented hell, and the gate was being guarded by the fallen angel who was thrown out of heaven. The client described the differences between heaven and hell in the sandtray for quite some time. Then she talked about a church that she had attended until recently and also about the Bible. She explained that the table and food represented the world of reality in which we live. While doing the work, the client remembered the times when she had near-death experiences: during childhood when she nearly drowned, and also during a high-school field trip when a broken boiler almost caused a horrible accident.*

*(From the therapist's observation journal, April 2015)*

Figure 12 was the initial sand picture created by a client who was in her early twenties. She did not make another picture for quite some time after this one. She lived together with her mother, and had lost all contact with her father since some time after the parents' divorce. They had divorced when the client was seven, and for two years she was under the care of her father. Circumstances later compelled them to move frequently,

disrupting the availability of a stable school for the client. In the end, she was unable to attend school. The client was neglected both physically and emotionally. Her mother and maternal grandmother eventually took her in but as she was continuously ostracized by her peers up until middle school, she developed a relationship trauma. At the time she came for therapy, she was undertaking vocational training. Her primary problems were social anxiety, somatization and hypoalgesia.

At the beginning of therapy, the client explained that she had attempted to receive psychological tests and counseling but had to stop because she suffered from somatic symptoms such as headaches and nausea. She admitted that even during the therapy session she felt anxious.



Figure 13. Sand picture 8

The skeletons appear in hell-next to heaven-in Figure 13. It seems the figures that remind us of the image of death are representations of her psychological void, a feeling of a dry and empty life. As the client was devoid of nurturance in early childhood, the ego had failed to promote the development of consciousness. It was surmised that she had led a life that hovered emptily around the boundary between life and death. Her several suicide attempts were probably the only time that made her aware that she was living.

In heaven, there is Jesus and a couple preparing for marriage. Marriage symbolizes union and also contains the conscious that tries to achieve wholeness (Ackroyd, 1993). Hell represents death, the spirit detached from the body, as symbolized by the skeleton. Additionally

in Figure 12, the coffin-which contains death-and the bathtub-the symbolic meaning of which is baptism or psychological rebirth-demonstrate the transformative aspect of the opposites in a symbolic way.

The characteristic of hell is that it is the opposite of the naturalness of the primal relationship, partially or entirely. It is hunger, pain, emptiness, coldness, helplessness, ultimate loneliness and the loss of all safety and shelter. It is a sudden fall to abandonment, and the fear of a void with no hope (Neumann, 1973). The client's childhood with its absence of nurturance could be seen through the way she swallowed her hunger and pain. Normal development has the power to unify, and enables one to adapt to his or her surroundings. Such normalcy cannot be forced upon by the negative mother archetype; it is guided by the relationship with the positive mother archetype, characterized by love and assurance.

Kalff (1989) and Neumann (1973) believed that for conscious to be expanded, psychological development must go through regression to its very initial stage. The client transforms through the symbols in the sandtray and is reborn through the ego's death and separation from the Self. The skeleton in the sandtray is a medium between life and death as well as a symbol of transformation, and it is the opposite of the symbol of heavenly marriage. The client experiences psychological transformation in which her body and soul integrate, and gradually breaks away from her fear of the devouring negative mother archetype.

### **III. Conclusion**

The skeleton is a rare figure used in sandplay, probably because for modern men and women-in other words for all of us-its primary symbolism, death, is considered taboo. Though there were only a few pictures with the skeletons during therapy, the amount of meaning they had for my clients was enough to induce me to explore the skeleton's symbolism.

When life, symbolized by people, encounters death, symbolized by the skeleton, there is a manifestation of the consciousness that unites the opposites. The skeleton has the symbolic power to lead to rebirth through a change in consciousness. The client is transformed through the symbols in the sandtray, and is born again psychologically through the ego's death and

separation from the Self. The skeleton is spirit that has broken away from the body; it is a medium that connects life and death, and the conscious and the unconscious. The objective of confronting the unconscious is to undergo transformation, and without it the unconscious will continue to wield the same amount of influence. As “the shelter for the intellectual psyche” and the medium between death and life, the skeleton contains the symbolism of transformation.

Such transformation connotes the power to depart from the old and to guide towards the symbolism of rebirth. The skeleton does not permanently symbolize death; also concealed in the skeleton is the symbolism of rebirth, the opposite of death. And the power that propels the death symbolism to unite with the rebirth symbolism is derived from a continued communication with the psyche.

Mankind, from ancient times, has viewed the death of unconsciousness as a cooperator of salvation in moments of exhaustion, crisis, and desire in the conscious life. The appearance of the skeleton in tales and rituals represents not the end of life but rather coexistence with death, which cannot be detached from life. It is my sincerest hope that, through sandplay therapy, the clients would be able to resolve their fear of encountering the unconscious, symbolized by death, and trust the archetypal meaning of the skeleton and follow its guidance.

“Memento mori!”

“Vanity of vanities all is vanity.”

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