



## The Interpretation of Destructiveness from Rorschach Test Responses

by Michael Maccoby

The Rorschach test requires that an individual interpret ink blots into meaningful content. In analyzing the responses, one must take account not only of their content but also the "determinants" of the response, including location on the blot, accuracy of the form, the use of color and shading qualities, and the individual's projection of movement onto the figures he sees.

The analysis of the Rorschach responses as a means of understanding personality demands a knowledge of symbolism and the ability to enter into the individual's experience which is similar to what is demanded of the psychoanalyst who interprets dreams. The difference is that the Rorschach analyst must also take account of the realistic properties of the stimuli and the way in which the subject responds to them. While the dream is created from a whole fabric, the Rorschach responses express decisions about what in the blot has been attended to and what ignored. Besides expressing the dynamics of the personality, these decisions also reveal the individual's accuracy of interpretation, his ability to organize experience, his mode of experiencing, the quality and range of his interests, and his originality, the freshness of his perception as opposed to conventionality and stereotypy.

As in the interpretation of dreams, the understanding of a dynamic tendency, a deeply-rooted impulse such as sadism or destructiveness, requires



a theory that sensitizes the Rorschach analyst to the meaning of the responses, to the underlying unity of symbols that would appear unrelated to the untrained observer. Dynamic trends as expressed in the Rorschach have been interpreted in terms of psychoanalytic theory.<sup>1/</sup>

When aggressive or destructive tendencies are analyzed in terms of Freud's theory of instincts, the power of the interpretation is limited by the weaknesses Fromm has described for Freud's theory of aggressiveness.<sup>2/</sup> In particular, such an interpretation of the Rorschach responses (for example Schafer's) takes for granted an aggressive instinct and concentrates on the mode of aggressiveness such as the oral-aggressive orientation, sado-masochism, anal attack, and phallic attack, or transformations of the "instinct" and defenses against its expression. An interpretation based on psycho-sexual instincts does not distinguish the quality of the aggressiveness. It interprets symbols according to a mechanical theory of drives and needs rather than clarifying the individual's passionate affinities towards life, towards violence, or towards death, and arriving at an understanding of the role these impulses play in the total character structure.

In contrast to an intellectual-deductive analysis such as this, we have approached the Rorschach test in terms of a method which combines the experiential interpretation of formal determinants<sup>3/</sup> with Fromm's experiential method of analyzing symbolism.<sup>4/</sup> This manner of interpreting a Rorschach protocol is extremely demanding. It requires the Rorschach analyst to put himself into the experience of the person who gives the response, to experience the whole response himself, rather than merely interpreting or decoding the intellectual content of the response according to theoretical reasoning.



In practice, the experiential method cannot be separated from theoretical understanding. Psychoanalytic theory sensitizes the Rorschach analyst to pay attention to relevant symbols and expressions, to look for connections between responses which would not be otherwise sought. Fromm's theoretical advances in understanding destructiveness sensitized us to seek distinctions between qualities of destructiveness, but it was necessary to project ourselves into the experience of individuals in order to encounter the actual expression of these theoretical distinctions.

In exploring the quality and significance of aggressive or destructive dynamic strivings, the Rorschach analyst must consider three general questions.

1. How does the individual experience a response which symbolizes aggressiveness or destructiveness? Is he projecting his deep-rooted passions, such as a wish to humiliate others, to destroy by fire, to rip people apart? Is his passion hot and violent? Is he merely expressing an enjoyment of aggressive play? Or is the aggressiveness necrophilic: destructive, cold and unfeeling, expressing an affinity to cadavers, decay, illness, and excrement.

Sometimes an individual responds to a destructive symbol with horror, sadness or despair. Some Rorschach analysts would interpret such responses as indicating the individual's defensiveness against his own hostility, but in our experience, they may express the individual's perception of destructiveness in his environment and his powerlessness to escape from it. Rather than indicating his own destructiveness, they symbolize his helplessness and hopelessness. Rather than showing defensiveness, such responses may indicate a total lack of defenses against a destructive reality.



The Rorschach analyst must also be alert to the fact that some responses are projective in the sense not of projecting the individual's own strivings into the figures perceived, but rather of seeing a world which justifies his dynamic attitudes. The individual who is fearful may perceive frightening images. The individual who is exploitative, sadistic, or cannibalistic sees a jungle in which dog eats dog and the weak are destroyed by the strong. If the world is as he perceives it, then his own behavior no longer feels irrational to him. His impulses and strivings can be then experienced by him as rational responses to objective reality rather than as irrational emotions.

In a sick world a sick person may feel at home because he does not have to distort reality in order to experience his impulses as rational. In a jungle an exploitative cannibal can feel sane. In a rigidly ordered society in which spontaneity is crushed a necrophilic individual is less likely to feel tension between his emotions and his world than he would in a society which stimulated freedom and aliveness. In the latter instance a necrophilic would be seen as an emotional cripple.

One must consider the possibility that a necrophilic in a necrophilic environment will not show any obvious neurotic symptoms and that he will perceive the world (and the Rorschach blots) without great distortion (although the content will be necrophilic). In contrast, a person with strong biophilic impulses will be more upset, have more symptoms, and even suffer perceptual distortion in an attempt to see the world differently from the way it is.

I used to think that the more the individual distorted the objective configuration of the blots to make them fit his needs, the more irrational were his strivings. Psychotics often take a single detail in the blot and



confabulate the whole, "seeing" it as something that does not fit the objective stimulus properties of the blot, "seeing" what no one else can see. Less disturbed individuals do not generally distort so boldly. Rather they sift and choose what they see and so interpret perceptions as to remain within the realm of the possible, but in such a way that their mode of relatedness, their solution to life is justified, while they close themselves off to experiences that would be difficult to assimilate to it.

However, I am no longer certain that extreme perceptual distortion is a sign of extreme pathology. Rather, as Freud suggested in his discussion of paraphrenia, perceptual distortion may be in the service of life, an attempt to reassert effective ties to the world. Freud was referring to the patient who had lost his relatedness to the world. However, there are cases in which a biophilic person cannot adapt himself to a destructive environment and feeling helpless to infuse it with life, he tries to "see" more life than exists. This type of compensatory distortion is not likely to strengthen an individual since one generates energy by remaining in contact with reality.

2. The second general question is: What triggers a destructive response? Here we do not speak about the childhood experiences of the individual that may have played a part in forming his destructive impulses. Interpreting historical causality from Rorschach responses leads one to highly speculative theoretical constructions. Rather we seek to understand what provokes destructive tendencies in the individual by analyzing his sequence of responses and the attention he gives to particular qualities of the stimulus.

In some instances, aggressiveness or destructiveness is a response to



symbolic qualities of the blot that attract the individual's attention. A depressed person may respond to the blackness of the blot, expressing anger in the content of his response. He may respond aggressively to the frustration of needs for contact and affection suggested by the shading qualities of the blot. He may express aggression in reaction to emotional demands suggested by the color. Symbolic configurations in the blots as well as the formal, perceptual qualities may provoke aggressive reactions. The individual may express his aggression against the mother or against authority figures that dominate and overpower him. He may express a destructive impulse directed at symbols of sexual expression or against symbols of joyful activity.<sup>5/</sup> Sometimes aggressiveness will be reactive against real or imagined injuries. In other instances the individual expresses a deep-rooted destructiveness against the stimulation of life itself.

Aggressiveness or destructiveness may be triggered by the individual's own previous responses, as well as by the symbolic qualities of the blot singled out. For example, a response that expresses powerlessness may be followed by one symbolizing violent destructiveness.<sup>6/</sup>

3. The third general question is: How does the individual respond to his own aggressive or destructive impulses? In the case studies analyzed by the Rorschach seminar at the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute we found that the most successful prognosis depends less on the degree of destructiveness in the patient than on the quality of his reaction to his destructive impulses. Where prognosis is best, the reaction to destructive urges expresses a striving to experience life more richly or joyfully, a love of life (biophilia) which becomes a counterforce to the destructive tendencies.<sup>7/</sup>





Sometimes the individual will react to destructive impulses with responses that indicate anxiety, suggesting that his destructiveness is felt as dangerous and upsetting to him. Such a reaction is more hopeful prognostically than when the reaction is one of defensiveness (denial or rigid reaction-formation, for example), where the individual avoids the implications of his pathology.

In the most disturbed individuals, destructive impulses trigger increased destructiveness, and there are instances in which reactive or sadistic aggression is followed by responses indicating necrophilia.<sup>8/</sup>

A careful consideration of responses in terms of these questions is the basis for understanding the role aggressiveness and destructiveness play in the structuring of the individual's character. In practice, the quality of aggressiveness or destructiveness as expressed in the Rorschach responses can best be understood in terms of Fromm's theory, when the analysis is carried out in terms of an experiential method.

In some individuals, aggressiveness is expressed as a defense of vital interests, as a response to authority, to sexual attack, or to emotional demands that threaten to overwhelm the individual. Some people show themselves as oversensitive to such attack, and one can say that they are overly subjective, too ready to interpret innocent demands as if they were attacks.

In other cases aggressiveness has the quality of a sadistic passion to dominate or inflict pain on other people. The individual may express an attraction to violence, to power, or his sadism may be rooted in primitive cannibalistic impulses. The Rorschach responses may show a justification of sadism by seeing the world as a jungle in which sadism is a rational response



to attack, or the sadism may be provoked by the individual's feelings of powerlessness, impotence, or helplessness. Such feelings of powerlessness themselves are sometimes the result of the individual's passiveness due to a symbiotic attachment to the mother or to powerful authorities. Sometimes the sadistic urges are blocked, when they conflict with the desire to be cared for or to receive affection from others, thus increasing the feeling of impotence. We have also analyzed cases where the sadistic impulses are in conflict with biophilia and with loving interest in other people. In such instances, sadism is fed by lack of faith in oneself and others, a feeling that love makes one defenseless and weak, and that destructiveness is necessary to survive in a hostile world.

It is important to emphasize that the Rorschach responses do not tell us about the individual's real experiences or his history. What we observe is an x-ray picture of his present impulses and images of himself and his world. One must be extremely careful not to interpret his accurate perceptions of the destructiveness he has experienced as though they were evidence of his own destructive impulses. For example, one Rorschach protocol that we analyzed in the clinical seminar at the Mexican Psychoanalytic Institute was full of images expressing sadism, cannibalism, and mutilation. The first reaction of the students was to interpret the responses as indicating deep destructive tendencies in the individual. A closer examination of the responses showed that the individual reacted to this destructiveness with horror, sadness and helplessness, that in his responses he was expressing his feelings about his life, about his destructive parents and the damage that had been done to him. He felt the destructiveness as tragic and senseless, as crushing





all that was beautiful and alive. On the other hand, he felt that other people consider destructiveness as normal, that the cannibalism of his mother in particular was interpreted by the world as loving concern. His question was: "Am I mad or is the world mad?" His last resort was psychoanalytic treatment, where he sought confirmation of his perception of the horror he was experiencing. In this case, the individual's lack of defenses and his inability to accept a conventional view of life crippled him, because he felt powerless and unable to break away from his mother. In fact, his prognosis was excellent, and with the help of the psychoanalyst who treated him he was soon able to begin the process of creating a life of his own away from destructive people. Another individual might have reacted very differently, remaining in the jungle and himself becoming a predatory animal.

Finally, there are instances of deeply-rooted necrophilic destructiveness characterized by attraction to dead things and a rejection of all that is alive and spontaneous.

An example is a highly educated woman in her early 20s who was hospitalized for suicidal attempts. The psychiatric report noted that she was obsessively concerned with cleanliness and refused sexual relations with her husband unless he scrubbed and cleaned his genitals to the point of hurting them. The Rorschach protocol expresses an affinity to cadavers and skeletons, and an active rejection of color stimuli by calling them "ink splotches, nothing more." The only "alive" response in the whole protocol was given to Card VIII where the Patient saw a tiger in position to attack. As is our practice in order to understand the meaning of the symbols expressed by the subjects, the psychologist later asked her what she knew about tigers. She



answered, "What everyone knows, that they are ferocious, that it is a wild animal, that they still may attack, even if you have them educated." The patient was speaking about herself, that for her to feel more alive she would need to destroy actively, for otherwise her attraction to death made her totally passive and unable to function.

Another instance of deeply-rooted necrophilia was that of a 40-year-old executive doing highly technical work in a large industry. He had always performed well at his mechanized work, but he was missing promotions because of his failure to get along with his fellow employees. His responses expressed a pervading affinity to what is dead and destroyed and a total lack of interest in what is alive. He saw decaying vegetation, diseased organs, and animals destroyed by projectiles sent by remote control. His was a mechanized world in which all that is organic is dead. His response to Card IX of the Rorschach was the following:<sup>7/</sup> "It seems like a landscape not of our epoch, but of millions of years ago, without vegetation and with calcified rocks reflected in the water. The central part is a fossil, the red color is mineral, iron, oxidized iron." It is interesting that the content was practically all accurately described, without perceptual distortion. Here is an individual who is able to function efficiently in highly technical and lifeless work, but who is unable to respond when warmth and spontaneity are called for. In a dead, fossilized and destroyed world, he is alive but in the world of human relations he is unresponsive. Unlike the suicidal patient who feels most alive being actively destructive, this man feels a passionate attraction to death, decay and barrenness. Behaviorally he is less disturbed as long as he can remain in a lifeless world.



There are other instances in which an individual has necrophilic tendencies together with affinities to life and away from destructiveness. The strength of these forces and the intensity of conflict between them may depend on external conditions which are subject to change. An extremely honest woman in her thirties came to see a psychoanalyst because of anxiety and her sense of despair because she was unable to love her husband and her children. She felt that one of her difficulties was that she had lived according to false values and had none to replace them. For most of her life she had been hard and cynical, believing that love was a sham and that only power and money counted. Lacking both power and money, she set out to exploit men, using her beauty and feeling a pitiless sense of triumph when she succeeded. Finally she married a rich man, but it turned out that he had serious financial difficulties. She felt cheated and angry. She helped him to recoup his losses, but she was unable to respond to his tenderness toward her, and felt contemptuous toward him.

Her Rorschach responses combined necrophilia with strong biophilic impulses. For years the necrophilic tendencies had been reinforced and had proved adaptive to her conditions of life. Now they were causing her anxiety. After the Rorschach report was read to her she had a dream in which she was trying to hold onto a construction that had been built out of nets (not solid, full of holes), but as she grabbed it, it collapsed and decayed cadavers fell on top of her, knocking her into a pit. She was horrified and terrified and felt she would be smothered by the bodies, but the analyst climbed down a rope into the pit and offered his hand to pull her out. The dream confirmed the Rorschach interpretation that her necrophilia now horrified her and overwhelmed



her with hopelessness. As she became more aware of the conflict and began to strengthen her interest in life, to express her talents and become more responsive to affection from her husband and children, the anxiety diminished and her hope grew. After three months of treatment the Rorschach was administered a second time, and the responses expressed a greater feeling of joy, of sexual responsiveness and less affinity to death, even though the conflict was not yet resolved. It is interesting to compare the responses to Card IX in the two protocols.

The first response was: "Something that is born, grows and dies. The pink color suggests life in the moment of birth, the green life in its growth and plenitude. The red suggests death and this white form (in the center) seems to be a spiritual form, something intangible that develops in life. (The psychologist asked whether the response was purely determined by the color.) The color and the sequence, and the pink also seems to have the form of a newborn baby. The green suggests plants when they are growing and producing, and the red suggests blood, death and decay." Here life is in the form of a helpless child or of color that cannot be integrated into a solid form. The sequence leads in the end to death, because the life forces, including the spiritual center, are indeterminate, undeveloped, without structure.

Three months later she responds as follows: "There seems to be light within the two openings in the center. Here also is a dome guarding a light which is like a flame. The flame is moving up, something blue which is ascending. Something that appears to be life surging up, but the green is discolored. It is not so alive as I saw it before, but here is the beginning of life (the pink) and here the light of the spirit. Now I no longer see red but orange,



and now things are not so black. Now it looks like two caricatured witches that do not frighten me, no? I see their hats and noses." Now the life forces are stronger, clearer and more protected. The flame takes form, rather than remaining an abstract, intellectualized concept. What before was an affinity to decay now becomes a fear of her own witchlike wish for power which threatens to block her chances for happiness. However, she can begin to see these impulses with humor, as caricatures. What before was a hopelessness in the face of necrophilic tendencies she did not understand has become a conflict between a magical solution to life based on power over men vs. impulses to be reborn, to be independent and to experience an inner wholeness and purity. During the analysis she became more and more aware of this conflict and saw that it discolored her life.

These examples of necrophilic tendencies have been reported in order to illustrate the different role that destructive tendencies can play in different individuals, to demonstrate the value of Fromm's theory of destructiveness for sensitizing the Rorschach analyst, and to show a method of exploring the quality of destructiveness in depth. The way in which the individual interprets the formless inkblot reflects his passionate strivings, his reactions to them, and the world he chooses to perceive. For the Rorschach analyst to understand the dynamic meaning of the responses, he must employ a theory which alerts him to the quality of experience expressed in symbolism and he must be able to project himself into that experience.



## NOTES

1. Rorschach himself interpreted responses given to the white spaces in the blot (the reversal of figure and ground) as indicating negativism or oppositional tendencies. He was also concerned with uncontrolled impulsiveness as expressed in responses to color. But, except for one posthumously-published paper (with E. Oberholzer), he did not attempt to interpret dynamic tendencies. Other Rorschach analysts, most notably Roy Schafer and Ernest G. Schachtel, have shown the possibilities of interpreting the content as well as the determinants of the responses to discover dynamic tendencies. See R. Schafer, Psychoanalytic Interpretation in Rorschach Testing, New York, Grune and Stratton, 1954; and E.G. Schachtel, Experiential Foundations of Rorschach's Test, New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1966.

2. See E. Fromm, The Heart of Man, New York, Harper and Row, 1964. In discussing Fromm's theory of aggression, I also draw on his book on the subject now in preparation.

3. See Schachtel (loc. cit.).

4. See E. Fromm, The Forgotten Language, New York, Rinehart and Co., 1951.

5. Rorschach analysts such as Schafer (loc. cit.) have noted that Card IV often stimulates reactions in regard to powerful authorities, because the blot can be easily seen as an overbearing figure. Card VI stimulates sexual imagery and symbolism, since the top of the blot reminds one of a phallus and the lower part suggests a vagina. A woman who responds to the phallic part of Card VI saying it looks like "a comic animal, very self-important, but ridiculous" may be expressing her hostility to male sexuality.





It is necessary, however, to take into account other responses to decide whether this reflects a deep-rooted castrating, sadistic tendency.

6. For example, an individual may see a falling figure or liquid running out, movement responses symbolizing feelings of powerlessness, which could be followed by seeing an atomic explosion or by a sadistic symbol such as a knife, a gun, or a charging bull.

7. This might be expressed on the Rorschach by the sequence of a destructive response followed by one of non-aggressive human movement or of integrated color and form representing natural beauty or objects that enhance life.

8. Such a sequence might be seeing people fighting, then seeing blood, and finally seeing destroyed cadavers.

9. I have found that Card IX often stimulates symbols that express the individual's spiritual core or center, his uniquely personal view of what is essential to him, of what makes life worth living, and sometimes of the forces that block self-realization. He expresses his personal spiritual orientation which may include magical power, power to destroy, re-birth, a love of beauty, a search for womb-like security, a conflict between forces of life and death, or in this case an affinity to a dead, inorganic world that does not demand spontaneity. It is difficult to say why spiritual symbolism is stimulated by the colored blots of the card. One can only point to a mystical quality of the colors, the sense of dimension suggested by the contrasts of dark and light, the mistiness of the center section with a central portion often suggesting water or flame.