

Written in 1923 and 1971 respectively, Sigmund Freud's *A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis* and Donald Winnicott's *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena* offer two different ways of interpreting religious experience. Freud analyzes an Austrian painter by the name of Christoph Haizmann who has made a deal with the Judaeo-Christian Devil following the death of his father: in return for his soul after nine months, the Devil will take him on as a son in the interim. Freud concludes, "our painter's wretched situation in life [would not] have provoked a demonological neurosis in him if his material need had not intensified his longing for his father" (Freud, 1923, p. 94). Indeed, this paper will argue that Freud explains why the Devil appears to Haizmann, yet Winnicott explains how that Devil functions; Haizmann's visions can be understood as transitional phenomena that ameliorate the feeling of loss and dependence.

In an infant's development, they begin without understanding of the difference between what is *self* and what is *not self* (Winnicott, 1971, p. 3). Winnicott explains that as they age, infants begin to explore different parts of their body, progressing "from 'hand to mouth' to 'hand to genital,'" and later beginning to "weave other-than-me objects into the person pattern" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 3). These are the initial introduction to things other than themselves. *Transitional phenomena* make possible this discovery, existing in an intermediate area between inner and outer life (Winnicott, 1971, p. 4). The *transitional object* is something within that broad transitional space which becomes of utmost importance to the infant's understanding of what is self and what is not self. To the infant the transitional object (usually something that to adults is worthless, perhaps a toy, blanket, or a song) is extremely cherished, brought wherever feasible; it becomes something that diminishes anxiety and a requisite for sleep (Winnicott, 1971, p. 3). The transitional object, which to the infant exists neither within the external nor the internal, helps them along their

“journey from the purely subjective to objectivity” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 4). Winnicott further writes that the importance of the transitional object is not what it symbolizes, rather it lies in its actuality or existence; the infant learns that this object is something that is different from itself—the fact that it, perhaps, substitutes the mother’s breast is beside the point (Winnicott, 1971, p. 6). When the child has matured enough, the transitional object loses its meaning and is forgotten about (Winnicott, 1971, p. 5). This area which once housed the transitional object persists through other, more tangible things which bring pleasure, like play, artistic expression, and indeed the relevant point to Haizmann, religion (Winnicott, 1971, p. 5).

When Haizmann’s father died, Haizmann fell into a deep state of depression, leaving him materially insecure (Freud, 1923, p. 71). It was in this “state of melancholia whereupon the Devil had approached him and asked him why he was so downcast and sad, and had promised ‘to help him in every way and to give him support’” (Freud, 1923, p. 72). Freud’s hypothesis is that “the Devil with whom the painter signed the bond was a direct substitute for his father” (Freud, 1923, p. 75). Further, Freud does not simply think that Haizmann loved and missed his father, causing him to enter agreement with the Devil; rather, Freud argues Haizmann had strong ambivalent feelings for his father, allowing the father to be debased into the demonic figure (Freud, 1923, p. 78). Freud therefore argues that the reason for his depression is not one of love and grief alone, rather it was one of dependence (Freud, 1923, p. 93). Freud writes, “He wanted all along simply to make his life secure. He first tried this with the Devil [and when that did not work] he tried to achieve it with the help of the clergy... perhaps he himself was only a poor Devil who simply had no luck; perhaps he was too ineffective or too untalented to make a living, and was one of those types of people who are known as ‘eternal sucklings’” (Freud, 1923, p. 93). To Haizmann, his father brought security and nourishment and was lost with his death, and the deal with the Devil

was to fill this hole, this *need*. This need was unchanged, continuously attached to different *objects*, from father to the Devil to the Church.

In his work, Winnicott writes of a child whose transitional object was string (Winnicott, 1971, p. 16). The boy, who for a time was an only child, had a mentally disabled sister who required a significant amount of attention. Adding to this, over the next year, his mother had multiple hospitalizations. Winnicott writes that the parents said that around this time, “whenever they went into a room, they were liable to find that he had joined together chair and tables. [Recently,] the boy tied a string around his sister’s neck” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 17). After explaining to the mother that the boy was dealing with “a fear of separation,” the mother opened up with the boy, and “from the moment that she had this conversation with him the string play ceased” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 17). Like other transitional objects, the string acted as a means of comfort and a reduction of his separation anxiety. This is analogous to the function of the Devil with Haizmann. To Haizmann, the Devil functioned like a transitional object, filling the need that was emptied by the death of his father. Haizmann’s relation to the Devil occupies an intermediate area; it is neither internal nor external—it is a psychologically real response even though it is not there. The actual existence of the Devil is tangential compared with its actual function. In the same way that the boy managed the separation from his parents, we saw how Haizmann managed dependence on his father. Returning to the thesis, Freud explains the Devil through paternal loss and dependence—why the Devil appeared; Winnicott explains how the Devil satisfied his need—how the Devil functioned.

What changes when Haizmann is read through Winnicott instead of Freud alone? Freud, on one hand, interprets the Devil through its causes: dependence and ambivalence felt by Haizmann. Winnicott by contrast changes the view from what the Devil may secretly mean in the subconscious to how the Devil affects Haizmann’s lived experience. Freud decodes the Devil;

Winnicott understands the Devil. Understanding the relationship between Haizmann and the Devil (which is done via transitional spaces), unearths nuances that the Freudian view cannot. *The Devil provided comfort. The Devil stabilized Haizmann during the period after his father's death. The Devil managed Haizmann's dependence on his father.* Tanya Luhrmann's chapter *Let's Pretend* within her book *When God Talks Back* illustrates this further. Within this chapter, Luhrmann writes of evangelical 'let's pretend' practices that anthropomorphize God as if he were really there. For example, individuals would "[imagine] what God is feeling when the elder brother rebels, [try] to hear God's voice in prophecy, [and pretend] that [they] and God are drinking coffee together at a coffee table" (Luhrmann, 2012, p. 92). Luhrmann elucidates that these practices work, "it made the external reality of living, interacting with God just that much more real" (Luhrmann, 2012, p. 93). Treating God in this way—a way that closely aligns with the transitional space—made God experientially and emotionally real and brought immense pleasure to those who practiced it.

Freud explains why the Devil emerged, but Winnicott shows that once the Devil appeared, it functioned as a presence that made the loss more bearable. Read together, the two methods of interpreting religious experience provide a fuller account of Haizmann's experience. Freud provides context for the Devil's appearance, explaining why his father's replacement came in the form of someone whom most would consider evil. Winnicott's method underscores the subjective experience of making a pact with the Devil, and how, in its own way, that brought comfort to a dependent man.

References

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