

PETER PAN, WENDY, AND THE LOST BOYS: A DEAD MOTHER COMPLEX

Melanie Klein and André Green offer competing descriptions of primitive mental development. The former emphasizes the need to control internal objects through splitting and projective identification, while the latter emphasizes a narcissistic retreat from objects through progressive deadening of the self. To bridge these theoretical differences a spectrum of fantasies is proposed ranging from reanimation (bringing deadness back to life) to reparation (healing damage caused by paranoid attack). Clinically, alternations between these two defensive patterns occur, acting together to avoid painful anxieties. The interplay of these defenses is illustrated by a dream drawn from clinical practice, from the life of James Barrie, and from his fictional creation Peter Pan.

Keywords: death instinct aggression, depression, narcissism, André Green, Peter Pan, James Barrie, dead mother

Almost from the beginning, psychoanalysis has been plagued by questions of whether competing theories (e.g., of structure or motivation) are mutually exclusive or can coexist. This question is at times the actual cause of schisms but at others serves as a defensive screen for narcissistic issues that are not addressed openly. I will consider this matter of either/both as it applies to some important Kleinian constructs regarding primitive psychodynamics and some powerful “competing” constructs of André Green. Specifically, Melanie Klein’s concept of the paranoid-schizoid position (1946) suggests that object relation exists from the beginning; in defense against anxieties of annihilation and disintegration, splitting severs love from hate followed by cycles of projection and introjection. André

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Green (1983, 1999), by contrast, considers splitting and projection a secondary process, a reanimation of the experience of the defense of deadness against anxieties over loss and abandonment. This is the context in which Green (1983), in his well-known paper, “The Dead Mother,” suggests and explores a set of narcissistic fantasies in the child concerning a *dead mother*.

In comparing Klein’s and Green’s constructs, I will use as my case study *Peter Pan*, a play by James M. Barrie that became an instant classic. Peter appeals to the adolescent in all of us as he pursues, free of parental control, a magical quest featuring exotic adventures and the myth of the endless happy childhood (Kulish 2000). Yet there is a much darker side to Peter: behind the fun, he is dead; he has lost the ability to love, disavowing any need for mothers and intending never to grow up, and so to avoid adult sexuality and responsibility. The central catastrophe in the life of Peter, and of his progenitor, James Barrie, was a *dead mother*; his story is an attempt to cope with this psychic disaster. I will show here how Barrie’s and Peter’s attempts to cope with this disaster provide a more useful perspective on alternative psychoanalytic constructs than the conventional notion of “competing” theories.

First I will briefly review the relevant theories of Klein and Green, as they relate to dead mother experiences—that is, experiences of sudden and unendurable maternal loss. Following a brief clinical example of my own, I will use illustrations from the literary creation Peter Pan and the life of its author, James Barrie, to demonstrate how Klein’s and Green’s postulates of dynamic conflict can work synergistically and fruitfully complement each other in an understanding of defenses against traumatic maternal experiences.

REPARATION: A FAMILY OF CONCEPTS

For Klein and her followers, internal objects and fantasies about objects—what she calls unconscious “phantasy”—exist from the beginning of development and underlie every mental process (Klein 1946; Isaacs 1948). However, in Klein’s view, absence cannot be represented in the schizoid position, so at that stage of development no representation of an “absent” breast is possible. When maternal love and attention are withdrawn and the experience of the good external breast vanishes altogether, the only psychic content that still remains “present” is the bad breast and

the paranoid defenses associated with it. What the child experiences, therefore, is not absence per se but a sense of persecution by a bad internal object (Segal 1957; O'Shaughnessy 1964; Alperovitz 2014).

The object when present is *prima facie* a good object. Whatever the difficulties, the feeding breast sustains life. As against this, the absent breast is first experienced in hunger, when it is needed and is not there; that is, the absent object is a bad object which is leaving the baby to starve and die [O'Shaughnessy 1964, p. 34].

O'Shaughnessy describes the infant's experience as of a bad breast intentionally "starving him to death" (p. 35). Following Bion (1962), she suggests that the only way forward is the long and hard development of the capacity to *think*—specifically, to think of a presence in the face of absence. For Klein (1935, 1937), to be able to tolerate the experience of the absent breast sufficiently to be able to think about it, and about its loss, is a maturational achievement that enables the move from the paranoid position to the depressive position.

The predominant fantasy of the depressive position, is one of *reparation* (Klein 1935, 1937, 1940, 1958). This is another maturational achievement, one that marks a successful working through of depressive anxiety (that is, concern for the loved one's survival) and reflects an aspect of depressive guilt in its preoccupation with repairing the damage to the object through fantasies of attack and destruction, and thus restoring it to availability. Klein is concerned both with the "damage" caused by the child's sadistic fantasies, and with the child's realistic recognition of parental damage or unavailability, which he, in fantasy, may believe he has caused. The aim is to repair the mother's body from such attacks on the "bad" projected objects by putting the dispersed bits of it back together again, and to bring what has been poisoned, devoured, or killed back to life through an acceptance of a good internal object, now more realistic and more secure. The resulting guilt, which can encompass the recognition that some damage cannot be repaired, must be accepted and lived with, a type of guilt that is less overwhelming than self-blame resulting from the earlier paranoid rage. Reparation, for Klein (1937), represents a mature level of guilt that operates throughout life. It forms links to good objects and leads to creative activities.

But reparation is not a unitary phenomenon; it exists on a spectrum that ranges from the remorse and regret of mature reparation on the one

hand to more primitive fantasies of *restoration* (Resnik 2001; Bronstein 2018) on the other. Reparation involves mending what in part has been destroyed but is still present, whereas restoration involves finding and undoing what has been lost and dead¹ (Resnik 2001, p. 195). When paranoid anxieties and guilt over persecutory intent interfere with integration, however, there may be a regression toward paranoid fantasy and the emergence of what Klein (1940) calls *manic defenses* (p. 349). The “benign circle started by this act [of reparation] becomes broken. The [mended] objects . . . change again into persecutors” (p. 351), leading to a denial of any fear of loss of the object and replacing it with a note of triumph; it reverses dependency and leads to a fantasy of humiliating the other. Restoration, then, is the fantasy that the self can magically bring dead objects back to life and subsequently maintain omnipotent control over them, endlessly punishing and humiliating them. Reparation marks the mature movement forward into the depressive phase, while restoration is a regression to the border between schizoid and depressive positions.

If Klein highlights object seeking and links to objects, Green highlights the reverse, a return to the ego, found in a series of defensive maneuvers and narcissistic fantasies that a child faced with the absent breast may resort to; these defenses—which he calls *the work of the negative*—work to dampen or eliminate the need for objects and so decrease the child’s experience of loss and danger. The work of the negative is a defense against a reality that is too painful to accept, and results in repression, denial, splitting, and disavowal (Green 2005, pp. 217–218). What those defenses have in common is suppression of the child’s need for objects and a subsequent disconnect from the objects themselves. The aim is not pleasure but finding refuge in narcissistic withdrawal and a fantasy of self-sufficiency.² He calls this a “massive decaathexis”³ (1983, p. 174); it is a demolition of preexisting structures, a total shutdown and loss of meaning resulting in “blank wounds” and “psychic holes” (p. 174) that imply the loss or destruction of the need for objects, and the

¹Klein herself (1935) appears to use reparation and restoration interchangeably.

²Green’s work of the negative bears some relationship to Bion’s concept of attacks on linking (1959). Bion’s emphasis is on hate and the formation of perverse and cruel links, while Green emphasizes withdrawal and blankness.

³Green takes the term *decaathexis* from Winnicott’s (1971) description of the child when the strain of the mother’s absence is too great (p. 15). In later works he also uses the term *disobjectalising* (Green 2005).

destruction of linkages to them. Green (1975, 1983, 1999) agrees with Klein⁴ that paranoid fantasy can be the result of absence and abandonment, but he believes that these fantasies are secondary to real experiences of loss, which, even while not yet organized in symbolic fantasy, may be relived in transference enactments.

This understanding leads Green to approach the reparation/restoration spectrum from another angle. Instead of paranoid cycles, he thinks the processes of mourning are ever present. His paper on the *dead mother complex* (Green 1983, pp. 170–200) is an example of the vicissitudes of mourning, specifically mourning of a specific type, the sudden and unexpected loss for the child. By “dead mother” he does not mean a mother who has actually died; that poses its own problems for the child, but at least there is a clear finality to it. Nor is he talking about clinical depression in general. The essential characteristic of the dead mother is that she *remains physically present in the life of the child, but is absorbed by bereavement to such a degree that she becomes emotionally unavailable*. She is preoccupied with an unacceptable object loss of her own to the point where, though alive, she is “psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care” (p. 170). In the life of James Barrie, as we shall see, this is the loss of a favorite son, but perhaps more commonly it is the mother’s loss of a parent or spouse that is so unacceptable. In either case, bereavement brings a “brutal change in the maternal imago” caused by a sudden and unexplained loss of an “authentic vitality” (p. 177). Crucially, this “catastrophe” of the mother’s sudden loss of accessibility is neither acknowledged nor talked about; no mourning by the child is allowed: “Love has been lost at one blow” (p. 178).

But the child cannot bear to live with this absence. Unable to leave his mother or abandon her, he is driven at once to two expedients: on the one hand the decathexis of the living maternal object, a state of deadness and loss of meaning, and on the other a profound identification with the “dead” one (p. 178), what Green calls “becoming the object itself” (pp. 178–179). This massive loss of meaning and emptiness is intolerable and requires “a second line of defense” (p. 180) to fill the void. Green

⁴Interestingly, Klein (1940) remarks that “when the depressive position arises, the ego is forced . . . to develop methods of defense which are essentially directed against the ‘pining’ for the loved object” (p. 348). In speaking of pining for the loved object, Klein suggests her awareness of abandonment anxieties, a position much closer to Green’s focus than Klein is usually credited with.

suggests three aims of these secondary compensations: to keep the ego alive through hatred of the object, to reanimate the maternal object, or to rival the object of her bereavement (p. 183). Fantasies of reanimation are one aspect of this secondary defense by which the deadness of the self is projected into the dead mother and then carefully tended. Following Green, I will call restoration fantasies *reanimation fantasies*, as this term evokes more acutely the experience of deadness vs. aliveness that I think is central to abandonment fears. They complete a reparation spectrum from Klein's vision of damage and repair at one end, to Green's vision of death and reanimation at the other.

It is worth noting that the fantasy of reanimation is mentioned only briefly by Green⁵ and rarely elsewhere in the psychoanalytic literature. Gottlieb (2007) puts it thus:

Terror of the dismemberment, disintegration, and decay of the body after death has been represented in ritual, myth, legend, art, and religious belief throughout the ages. So too has the wished-for triumph over these inevitable processes. Commonly, bodily experience after death is represented mentally in cannibalistic ideas of eating and being eaten, which are then countered by the wishful undoing of cannibalistic destruction through its reversal: swallowing as regurgitation, dismemberment as re-memberment, disintegration as reassembly [p. 1217].

It is the depressed and indifferent mother who needs to be cared for and reanimated: "to nourish the dead mother, to maintain her perpetually embalmed . . . for the subject wants to be the mother's polar star, the ideal child, who takes the place of an ideal dead subject, who is necessarily invincible" (Green 1983, p. 190). The child must sacrifice his own vitality to nourish the dead mother and reanimate her "by renouncing the use of these new potentialities of the ego, to obtain possible pleasures" (p. 190).

I view Klein's and Green's theories as different ways to understand primitive anxieties of fragmentation and abandonment, and to explain the defenses constructed against them; Klein supposes that very young children deal with that trauma by fragmenting objects in order to control them, while Green supposes a protective effort to decrease or eliminate the need for objects altogether. Klein and Green each understand their theory as positing universal defensive structures in the primitive mind, but these theories are mutually contradictory as written. For Klein,

⁵"To reanimate the dead mother, to interest her, to distract her, to give her a renewed taste for life, to make her smile and laugh" (Green 1983, p. 183).

defense is representable only as organized fantasy, loss and abandonment being unrepresentable, but in Green's view, abandonment is carried as enactive pressure and organized fantasy is secondary, a defensive reaction to the deadness and emptiness resulting from decathetic defenses. The dead mother complex, then, is a clinical example of decathetic defenses in action to illustrate more universal defensive structures. I make the claim that both sets of defenses, paranoid fantasies and decathexis, operate together. The failure of one set of defenses to eliminate anxiety may trigger the other, in either direction. Paranoid fantasies may appear, and only when they fail are decathetic defenses triggered, following Green's view. But we can also note the opposite, as when paranoid defenses are triggered by a failure of decathetic ones. This suggests an alternation between paranoid and decathetic defenses to prevent any awareness of the pain of loss. These two theoretical views together offer a more complex view of certain clinical presentations than either alone provides. Klein and Green can be reconciled if we agree with Klein that abandonment anxieties are not representable in the schizoid position, but agree with Green that abandonment anxieties can be carried as raw, unsymbolized forms that trigger splitting and projection. I am adding the reverse, that failure of splitting and projection may trigger decathetic defenses. I will offer here an illustrative clinical case, and then explore the relevance of this understanding to a beloved story and its author.

CLINICAL EXAMPLE

Here is a brief clinical example illustrating this alternation of defenses. This patient, well advanced in his analytic work, is just beginning to be aware of his fears of loss. Multiple abandonments in childhood have been repeated in the transference, but not consciously felt. He is only now beginning to be able to think, and dream about, this panic-inducing issue. Earlier, he experienced my absences with paranoid fantasies of my need to control him, to which he responded with unconscious defiance in repeated absences and last-minute cancellations; he was completely unaware of any feeling of abandonment. In this hour, I am about to leave for a week's vacation. He is struggling to find a way to feel that he is still in contact with me; he can start to think about abandonment. In the context of his frequent urge to sleep during sessions and remain deadened, a

defense we are quite familiar with, he reports a nightmare from the night before. This is very new; he rarely reports dreams.

He is at home with his wife, his family, and hers. He tries to turn on a light and it remains dark. There is no electricity. Each room is the same—dark. He then realizes that his wife has disappeared, and he starts to scream in panic. Then he wakes up.

He readily relates the dream to my upcoming absence. What is new is his awareness of the panicky feeling, which to this point has remained unconscious. We have long known how he usually deals with such situations: either he denies my being away and doesn't think about it, or he replaces me with the fantasy of an idealized woman who will satisfy his every wish. But this time, when I ask about the panic, he reports an image of himself walking the plank, with a huge shark, evidently me, waiting in the water, ready to tear him to bits. This fantasy of a paranoid attack—aggressive and hateful—has pierced his denial and briefly illuminated his panic about abandonment; he will later say that he was aware of feeling abandoned for a “millisecond,” but then the awareness disappeared. After the image of the shark, he describes how other images start to appear, more consistent with Green's defenses. He now tells me that when he leaves my office, he is aware that I disappear as an internal presence; he loses any affective connection to me; I am blotted out, and he instantaneously turns to his cellphone, his work, and fantasies of sexual conquest to compensate. He is now aware of feeling dead inside; the image of walking the plank is one of suffocation, of drowning and dying. The disappearance of electricity and light in the dream captures the loss of energy and vitality that he struggles with constantly. After discussing these images in the hour, he finds himself again falling asleep on the couch—another “deca-thesis” and deadening of pain. Thus, what we see is a mixture of images and feeling states, some of them paranoid in nature and some of them images of deadness and disappearance.

A BIOGRAPHICAL STORY AND A LITERARY ONE

James M. Barrie

James M. Barrie (1860–1937) illustrates, both in his own life and in his most enduring creation, *Peter Pan*, a classic dead mother complex and

a multidimensional set of defenses against it. Without clinical data from an actual analysis, I cannot of course assert that Barrie suffered from a dead mother complex, nor of course that Peter does. But there is plenty of biographical, autobiographical, and textual evidence that suggest that the structure of *Peter Pan* illustrates the kind of unconscious fantasy described by both Klein and Green, and that similar defensive dynamics can be discerned in Barrie himself.

James Barrie was born in Scotland, the ninth of ten children, two of whom died in infancy. He was short of stature and had several successful older brothers, a combination that left him feeling overlooked and overshadowed, and he turned to telling stories and organizing theatrical events to attract attention (Birkin 1979). The central trauma of Barrie's life occurred when he was six. His fourteen-year-old brother, David, reportedly their mother's favorite, died in an ice-skating accident, a devastating event from which she never really recovered. In his biography of his mother, Barrie (1897) movingly describes his attempts to pull her out of depression. She took to her bed with the christening clothes of his dead brother; he tried to get her to laugh by clowning; he pretended to be his brother to get her attention, even dressing like him, but it didn't work: "I had not made her forget the bit of her that was dead; in those nine-and-twenty years he was not removed one day farther from her."

As a longer-term solution, Barrie would write stories that he would read aloud to entertain her. These efforts were what Green would call attempts at reanimation, and eventually the effort to entertain (or enliven) became his vocation. He started as a journalist, moved on to writing short stories and novels, and finally became famous as a playwright. By the time he died in 1937, he was very wealthy and one of the most famous men of his time.

Barrie desperately wanted to marry, to be loved by someone, but his relationships with women were usually crushes from afar; real relationships made him very anxious (Birkin 1979). He recorded in his notebooks some of his fears of women:

My ghastly nightmare always begins in the same way. . . . I see myself slowly wakening up in a misty world . . . the heavy, shapeless mass . . . assumes the form of a woman, beautiful and cruel, with a bridal veil over her face. . . . One hideous night she came for me in a cart. I was seized hold of by invisible hands and flung into it. A horrible fear possessed me that I was being taken away to be hanged, and I struggled to escape [quoted in Birkin 1979, pp. 27–28].

In 1894, when he was thirty-four, he married an actress, Mary Ansell, whom he had met when casting his first London play. The marriage was childless, and some biographers suggest it was unconsummated⁶ (Birkin 1979; Purkiss 2001). In 1908, his wife began an affair that eventually led to their divorce.

But the man so acutely uncomfortable with women (and other adults) felt safe and alive with children (and dogs). Soon after his marriage, Barrie acquired Porthos, a Saint Bernard puppy, who became his constant companion. He was especially at ease with preadolescent boys, whom he would encounter on his walks in London's Kensington Gardens with his dog. He and Porthos would perform tricks and games together to amuse and attract children. Birkin (1979) reports that Barrie had total confidence "in his ability to fascinate any child he cared to ensnare" (p. 35). In 1897, when Barrie was thirty-seven, he had a fateful encounter with the Llewelyn Davies family. The first meeting was with three of the boys of the family (George, age four; Jack, age three; and Peter, not yet one) during one of his walks; he and George were utterly captivated with each other. According to Birkin, "George had never met anyone quite like him; he was old but not grown up. He was one of them. His unpredictable moods made him all the more intriguing" (p. 41).

In fact, *Peter Pan* was born out of several summers when Barrie played shipwreck games with the boys, and of the stories he made up to amuse them. When Barrie met the boys' mother, Sylvia, at a dinner party, he was captivated with her as well and soon become a confidant of the family.

In the Davies family he had found what he had been searching for all his adult life—a beautiful woman who embodied motherhood, a brood of boys who epitomized boyhood—and he did not mean to let them go. He could flatter Sylvia, even flirt with her, yet feel secure in the knowledge that she would never put him to the test (Birkin 1979, p. 59).

He was especially close to George, Michael (born in 1900), and Nico (born in 1903); he liked pretending to be their father, but in fact seemed to engage with them more as the leader of a gang of adolescent boys. Birkin suggests that Michael, born after Barrie became intimate with the

⁶There is no direct evidence for this conclusion. It is based on Barrie's unpublished journals, where he documented his great fear of sexuality, and on ambiguous comments by May Ansell, writing decades later.

Llewelyn Davies family, was special to Barrie because “he would be able to share in the birth of this new child as if it were his own” (p. 69).

Barrie as a child and college student had been shy and retiring, but he developed in his professional life the ability to take over and control others. This was evident with the Llewelyn Davies family; he showed up almost daily at their house and tended to push Arthur, the boy’s real father, into the background; Arthur tolerated Barrie but never much liked him. But Barrie was able to captivate Sylvia with his money and his fame, monopolizing her time and taking her on vacations without her husband. After Arthur died in 1907, Barrie provided financial help to the family, and after Sylvia’s death in 1910 he became the boys’ guardian. He devoted his life to them, but none of them were successful, and it is hard not to wonder whether the wish that Barrie attributed to Peter—not to grow up—had been projected by him onto the Llewelyn Davies boys as well. George died in 1915 in World War I, and Michael in a swimming accident in 1921. There was speculation at the time that Michael’s death was a suicide (Birkin 1979, p. 293). Barrie had been particularly close to Michael; they had corresponded daily; he was devastated by his loss: “What happened was in a way the end of me, and practically anything may be forgiven me now. He had been the one great thing in my life for many years, and though there are little things to do, they are very trivial” (quoted in Birkin 1979, p. 295). After Michael’s death, Barrie seemed to lose his creativity; he never wrote anything of note again, and was plagued by depression and insomnia. Peter committed suicide in 1960, at the age of sixty-eight, long after Barrie’s death in 1937.

Let me return now from the biographical to the psychological. Green’s dynamics of the dead mother complex show most clearly in Barrie when his older brother dies and his mother is acutely depressed. Green would consider this a catastrophe, and it is for Barrie; he adopts desperate measures to attract his mother’s attention—none of which work. His first solution was to identify with his dead brother and “become” him, adopting his clothes and mannerisms. Then he turns to a desperate reliance on “entertainment” to attract his mother’s attention, but this didn’t work either. We can see the pain in Barrie’s description of his mother’s depression and his perpetual sense of being left out and abandoned. Never wanting to grow up is a fantasy of remaining a perpetual adolescent, thus avoiding both the helplessness and dependency of childhood and the responsibility and separateness of adulthood. To maintain a

tie to his mother, Barrie must remain fourteen, his dead brother's age. To grow up is to abandon her and lose her. It is his job to keep her alive, to reanimate her, a duty he can never shirk. As Green points out, in her absence and unavailability, the "dead" mother is ruthless; there is no room for negotiation and no room for rivals. Barrie is prohibited from truly loving other women. He had crushes on them from afar, but was curiously dead in the matter of sexual desire. Even with Sylvia, whom he worshiped, what is most evident is his need to make her dependent on him and to exert control over her. Barrie came alive only with his true love objects, his gang of boys, who were not considered rivals to his mother. But even there, while they too are dependent on him, the dependency is not mutual; he is a ruthless dictator who has complete control. When Michael dies, the original trauma is reexperienced. He is cannibalized by the dead mother, what Green calls a "primitive fusion" (1983, p. 195). The secondary reanimation has failed and he has joined his mother in deadness.

Peter Pan

At the height of his career, however, this childless man/child, who desperately wanted to be loved, gave birth to a being named Peter Pan, another like himself, who delighted and fascinated the English-speaking world, and still does.

We first meet Peter⁷ in the novel *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*,⁸ which was published in 1906 and tells the story of Peter's birth and infancy. In late 1903 Barrie began work on the story of Peter's perpetual adolescence: this became the play *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (Barrie 1904). Debuting on December 27, 1904, it was an immediate success and remains one to this day. The play was groundbreaking for its time, featuring a cast of over fifty, a huge set, and a mixture of styles and moods. It played for many seasons around the winter holidays in London and was also successful in its American debut. It was later rewritten and scored as a musical, the form in which it is probably

⁷Pan is an ancient Greek god of nature, shepherds, and rustic music, companion of the nymphs. He was half-man and half-goat. Pan was famous for his erotic powers and was often featured with a large phallus. But by the time of Barrie, the English romantic tradition had converted Pan into a symbol of the innocence of children before sex corrupts.

⁸A novel-within-a-novel in *The Little White Bird* (Barrie 1902), a novel published separately in 1906.

best known to most Americans.⁹ Its popularity has never waned, and stage, musical, and film versions continue to appear around the world. In 1911 Barrie rewrote the play as a novel, which he called *Peter and Wendy* (Barrie 1911). This is the version I will use as my source.

Since everyone knows the story of *Peter Pan*, I am concentrating here on its psychological rather than its dramatic aspects. Several passages from the novel show its impressive correspondence with Green's conception of dead-mother dynamics and, to the extent that we can infer from his behavior, with the way these dynamics played out in Barrie's life. They also show how the defensive structures postulated by Klein and Green can indeed coexist in complementary fashion; how the failure of one set of defenses to eliminate anxiety will trigger the other and how, therefore, paranoid fantasies and decaathexis can alternate rapidly with one another as defensive strategies fail and succeed. In view of this alternation, I suggest that the infantile mind has at least two possible resources for coping with traumatic anxiety: by eliminating the need for objects or by fragmenting objects in order to control them.

Peter Pan

The genesis of Barrie's tragedy is mirrored in Peter in the novel *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (Barrie 1906). We learn early on that Peter "escaped from being a human when he was seven days old; he escaped by the window and flew back to Kensington Gardens" (Barrie 1906, p. 20) to live with the birds and the fairies. Having heard his parents talking about growing up, he was determined to avoid it himself.¹⁰ After living in the Gardens and having had a number of adventures with the fairies, he decides to return to his mother. Peter is confident that the window he flew out of will be open: "Mother always keeps it open in the hope that I may fly back" (Barrie 1906, p. 68). But when he arrives back at his mother's, "the window was closed, and there were iron bars on it, and peering inside

⁹Barrie continued to tinker with the play until the script was published in 1928. The musical debuted in 1954, directed by Jerome Robbins and starring Mary Martin. There were four revivals on Broadway, a Disney animated version, and numerous movie and television adaptations. The play itself is rarely revived, though its pantomime version is popular in England and the musical is popular in the U.S.

¹⁰Barrie is using a literary device to place the motive for flying away to the end of the sequence, the experience of being locked out, but, as sequential time is easily reversed in the unconscious, we can psychologically read the experience of abandonment as primary and his flying away as a defensive reaction.

he saw his mother sleeping peacefully with her arm around another little boy. . . . He had to fly back, sobbing, to the Gardens and he never saw his dear again. What a glorious boy he had meant to be to her!” (p. 74).

But, Barrie reminds us, “There is no second chance, not for most of us. When we reach the window it is Lock-out Time.¹¹ The iron bars are up for life” (p. 75). This is the genesis of Peter’s tragedy, the complete and unexpected loss of his mother, which Barrie tellingly symbolizes as being locked out. Peter understands himself not to have been forgotten, but to have been rejected, and we have to look back to the beginning of the novel to understand why he responds this way. It is in this context that we come to understand Peter’s explanation of his plight as a retrospective defensive fantasy—that it was *he* who was responsible for the separation, not she. He converts the pain of abandonment into an heroic act of escape—an act of rebellion against the inevitability of growing up. But at the same time, he understands himself to have been definitively rejected, through his fault or hers, and the fantasy of never wanting to grow up is a defensive reaction to having been locked out. Growing up means facing and accepting one’s losses, which Peter is unable to do. In the coexistence of these two beliefs—that he was locked out in punishment for his escape, and that he left of his own accord, in pursuit of unfettered freedom—we can see in operation the coexistence of Klein’s and Green’s theories of defense against traumatic loss.

When we meet Peter¹² again, in the novel *Peter and Wendy* (Barrie 1911), he is visiting the Darling household, because he likes to hear the stories that their mother tells her three children: Wendy,¹³ the oldest, and her brothers John and Michael. One night, Mrs. Darling discovers Peter listening and he flees, but Nana, the Newfoundland dog who is the Darling’s nursemaid, catches his shadow, and Mrs. Darling rolls it up and stores it away in a drawer. When Peter returns for it, along with Tinker Bell, “his fairy” (p. 45), there are no parental figures in the house—the parents are at a dinner party, and Nana has been chained in the garden after a conflict with Mr. Darling.

¹¹Kensington Gardens is closed at sunset, what the fairies call Lock-out Time. They have the freedom of the park until it opens in the morning.

¹²Peter is not given an age. It is tempting to imagine him as fourteen, the same age as Barrie’s dead brother, David.

¹³Wendy is not given an age either, but I imagine her, based on her relationship with Peter, to be on the cusp of adolescence.

Wendy awakens to the noise Peter is making while looking for his shadow and they get into conversation. Peter wants Wendy to return to Neverland with him, and he is very seductive in his attempts to persuade her. At first he flatters her: “‘Wendy,’ he continued, in a voice that no woman has ever yet been able to resist, ‘Wendy, one girl is more use than twenty boys’” (p. 40); Barrie notes that she felt “every inch a woman” (p. 41). Wendy is quite pleased at this attention and spontaneously offers to kiss him; Peter, not knowing what a kiss is, holds out his hand instead and she gives him a thimble. Peter returns the “kiss” by giving her an acorn button from his shirt. In this newly found intimacy, he tells her about having run away from home because he heard that he was expected to grow up. When Peter tells Wendy that he lived among fairies, she is entranced; Peter then tells her that every time a child does not believe in fairies, one of them falls down dead. He then thinks of Tinker Bell, and realizes that she is nowhere to be seen:

“Wendy,” he whispered gleefully, “I do believe I shut her up in the drawer!” He let poor Tink out of the drawer, and she flew about the nursery screaming with fury. “You shouldn’t say such things,” Peter retorted. “Of course I’m very sorry, but how could I know you were in the drawer?” [p. 45].

Wendy is curious about Peter’s life and learns about the Lost Boys:

[They] are the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to the Neverland to defray expenses. I’m captain. “What fun it must be!” “Yes,” said cunning Peter, “but we are rather lonely. You see we have no female companionship.” “Are none of the others girls?” “Oh no; girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams.” This flattered Wendy immensely. “I think,” she said, “it is perfectly lovely the way you talk about girls” [p. 47].

It is then that he reveals that he has come to the Darlings’ house to listen to Wendy’s mother tell stories; his favorite is Cinderella: “About the prince who couldn’t find the lady who wore the glass slipper.” “Peter,” said Wendy excitedly, “that was Cinderella, and he found her, and they lived happy ever after” (p. 49).

Peter then wants to leave, to tell the Lost Boys about the ending of Cinderella, but Wendy calls him back: “Don’t go, Peter,” she entreated, “I know lots of such stories” (p. 50); “he came back, and there was a greedy look in his eyes now which ought to have alarmed her, but did not”

(p. 49). Then: “He had become frightfully cunning. ‘Wendy,’ he said, ‘how we should all respect you’” (p. 50). Peter “lures” (p. 56) her most successfully with the promise that she could be able to be a mother to the Lost Boys—tell them stories, tuck them into bed, darn their clothes—and that she could see mermaids.

Barrie suggests clearly that Peter is complimenting Wendy as a manipulation to get what he wants—Wendy coming to Neverland—by praising women but maintaining an essential coldness; this is an example of Green’s negative narcissism, controlling and infused with hate. Wendy is a split object for Peter; he needs to control and capture the idealized motherly Wendy, and eject the erotic and potentially abandoning Wendy. Wendy, however, mistakes Peter’s intention for real warmth and responds with erotic feelings—wanting to kiss. In the exchange of thimble and acorn button, there is a connection—a kind of enacted intercourse—but it remains unconscious for Peter. It is a source of anxiety, too, which he makes clear in this speech about having run away from home because he was expected to grow up. Presumably this anxiety continues in the present; Wendy has erotic longings and pressures Peter to respond erotically; and he, in fear, wants to fly away—this is a decaathexis, an attempt to dampen any sexual longings. He changes the subject to fairies dying; abandonment and death are now in the room, and both are linked to erotic attachment—a further decaathexis. He accidentally locks Tinker Bell in a drawer—this is another abandonment, but now it is Peter doing the abandoning: he turns the tables on Tinker Bell, and there is a touch of sadism in his pleasure. Erotic longings are replaced by hate, and Peter continues to block any awareness of the erotic wishes that give rise to them. In speaking of Cinderella, he briefly reveals some of his own ambivalent longings—to be searched for and found—but then immediately wants to leave: another decaathexis. Fearing Wendy’s loss, he returns to manipulation. But although he understands clearly what she needs, his own needs are less clear, at least to him; consciously he recognizes the Lost Boys’ need for mothering, but any need of his own is denied and remains unconscious.¹⁴

Now the everyday frame of a London childhood gives way to the magical world of Neverland, an island populated by the Lost Boys, a tribe of Redskins, wild beasts including a giant crocodile, mermaids, and

¹⁴Peter is ambivalent about his own need for mothering. On the one hand, he states that mothers are very overrated, but he does say “us” when he suggests to Wendy that she can tuck them all into bed.

pirates (p. 76). Except for the mermaids, there is perpetual war among the other parties, each of which is trying to kill the others—the pirates want to kill the Lost Boys, the Redskins want to kill the pirates, the beasts want to eat the Redskins—not to mention the crocodile, who is out for Captain Hook, the head pirate: “All wanted blood” (p. 77).

As many of us recall, Tinker Bell has a passionate attachment to Peter. She is jealous of Wendy, and incites Tootles, one of the Lost Boys, to shoot her with an arrow. Wendy falls to the ground, presumably dead. Only then do the Lost Boys notice that Wendy is a “lady” and not a bird as they had thought. They all think of their own lost mothers and Tootles says: “Pretty mother, pretty mother, but when at last she really comes, I shot her” (p. 96). When Peter arrives and sees Wendy dead, he says, “She is dead”; he adds uncomfortably, “Perhaps she is frightened about being dead” (p. 98). He then thinks of “hopping off . . . till he was out of sight of her, and then never going near the spot anymore” (p. 98). He plans to kill Tootles in revenge, and is stopped only by Wendy’s showing signs of life. He then has the idea of building a house around her to keep her safe and warm and thinks of fetching a doctor. Slightly, another of the Lost Boys, pretends to be one and pronounces her cured, at which point she revives.

Here Peter retreats from the erotic rivalry between Tinker Bell and Wendy, first to paranoid aggression, envy, and murder, then to a state of deadness, and finally to a ritual of reanimation. The Lost Boys and Tinker Bell are operating at a paranoid level, acting out Tinker Bell’s envy of Wendy and her wish to destroy her rival. The Lost Boys act out their own ambivalence about mothering, wanting yet attacking the same love object. Peter’s first reaction is to deny death and to want to leave, a move toward decaathexis. He then immediately switches back to the paranoid in his desire to kill Tootles, but there follows another rapid shift to fantasies of reanimation, of bringing Wendy back to life.

After some time on the island and a number of adventures, Wendy tries to clarify Peter’s feelings for her. She sews and cooks, and she takes care of Peter when he is troubled. They have become Mummy and Father to the Lost Boys. When the kids squabble, Wendy keeps order and tucks them in bed. But one day, she suddenly asks Peter: “I have now passed my best, but you don’t want me to change, do you?” (p. 159). Peter thinks about being a father and gets scared. Wendy reminds him: “but they [the Lost Boys] are ours, Peter, yours and mine” (p. 159), and Peter replies: “but not really, Wendy” (p. 159). It is then that she asks: “Peter . . . what

are your exact feelings for me?" (p. 159). He replies: "Those of a devoted son, Wendy." "I thought so," she says, and goes and sits "by herself at the extreme end of the room" (p. 160). Frankly puzzled, Peter says, "You are so queer, and Tiger Lily [the Indian princess] is just the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother" (p. 160).

After a bit, Peter asks Wendy:

"Then what is it?" and she replies: "It isn't for a lady to tell."

"Oh, very well," Peter said, a little nettled. "Perhaps Tinker Bell will tell me."

"Oh yes, Tinker Bell will tell you," Wendy retorted scornfully. "She is an abandoned little creature."

Here Tink, who was in her boudoir, eavesdropping, squeaked out something impudent.

"She says she glories in being abandoned," Peter interpreted.

He had a sudden idea. "Perhaps Tink wants to be my mother?"

"You silly ass!" cried Tinker Bell in a passion [p. 160].

Wendy and Tinker Bell both love Peter erotically, but he is oblivious, as he has deadened his erotic needs. It is at this point that Wendy impulsively decides to leave Peter and return to her family, partly to annoy him and partly, I think, because she has realized his deadness. She tells of her faith that she can return anytime and that the window will be open. Peter, already sensing her loss, becomes quite agitated and remembers his own experience of being locked out: "Long ago," he said, "I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me; so I stayed away for moons and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed" (p. 168).

After Wendy and the Lost Boys are captured by the pirates, and Captain Hook is killed by Peter, they all fly back to the Darlings' home. The Lost Boys agree to be adopted by the Darlings but Peter refuses. Barrie tells us: "There was none to see it except a little boy who was staring in at the window. . . . he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be ever barred" (1911, p. 247).

Lock-out Time is Peter's original trauma. He expected unconditional love from his mother, that her window would always be open. When he is suddenly replaced and apparently forgotten, he must recast his wish to grow into secure autonomy into an "escape," where he need never grow up and have to deal with the vicissitudes of attachment and loss. We see

the trauma reenacted at the end of the story, when Peter refuses adoption and (now voluntarily in fact) remains on the outside looking in. For Barrie, his lock-out time occurred when he was six and his mother lost her favorite son to death. Both he and Peter are preoccupied, consciously and not by the sudden unavailability of a mother who is preoccupied with someone else—the dead mother complex in a nutshell.

More particularly, two central fantasies weave through the lives of James Barrie and his creation Peter Pan: one is the fear of growing up; the other is a fear of mothers. For Barrie, these fears are a defensive pattern resulting from his abandonment by his mother when her favorite son died and Barrie was “locked out.” After that, Barrie turned to adolescent boys as companions and love objects, becoming a perpetual adolescent himself. Peter Pan, his creation, gives voice to these defensive fantasies and can do what Barrie could not—remain an actual boy.

DISCUSSION

Klein

From a Kleinian point of view, Peter’s rejection of mothers is a manic defense against depressive anxiety. The goal of this defense is to deny the importance of good internal objects, while at the same time exercising omnipotent control over them. This would be Klein’s view of the dead mother, a mother physically present but emotionally unavailable. This mother is desperately needed, imposing “a torturing and perilous dependency on its loved objects” (Klein 1935, p. 277), but any such need is humiliating and hated. Klein (1940) speaks of a wish for triumph over the humiliating parent, to reverse the dependency and make the parent the humiliated one (pp. 351–352). This may lead to a vicious circle of ever increasing hate and paralyzing guilt, and then is defended against by a contemptuous fantasy that the object is not worth bothering about; this is exactly what we see in Peter’s dismissal of mothers.

Klein (1935) also suggests that “paranoid fear and suspicions were reinforced as a defense against the depressive position” (p. 274). Tinker Bell and Wendy are both split objects for Peter: Wendy the good maternal object, and Tinker Bell the bad sexual object. Klein (1957) describes greed as “an impetuous and insatiable craving, exceeding what the subject needs and what the object is able and willing to give” (p. 181). We could hypothesize that the maternal abandonment has stimulated in Peter

a greedy need for love. We see this acted out in his need for constant companionship and adoration from others, yet the greed is disavowed and projected. If Wendy wants love, she must be the greedy and controlling one, and objects who become greedy persecutors must be defended against.

For Klein, sadness and the awareness of abandonment are a developmental achievement of the depressive position, achieved when the object can be loved as both whole and separate. There is true concern for the object; it can retain its basic underlying goodness even when it disappears. True mourning is then possible, as what is lost is still valued and loved.

Green

When we concentrate, however, on a specific aspect of loss—that is, when the loved maternal object suddenly disappears emotionally, yet remains physically present—Green's dynamics of the dead mother complex come clearly into view, both in Barrie and in Peter. The fantasy of never growing up is multifaceted. It is a fantasy of remaining a perpetual adolescent, while avoiding the helplessness and dependency of childhood and the responsibility and separateness of adulthood. We can see the pain in Barrie's description of his mother's depression and his perpetual sense of being left out and abandoned. The image of his mother lying in bed with the dead brother's clothes is captured in the image of Peter locked out, while his mother sleeps with another little boy in bed with her. Barrie's solution was to identify with his dead brother and become him, adopting his clothes and his mannerisms. In Green's view, he would feel it was his job to keep her alive, to reanimate her; this is a duty he can never abjure. He must remain fourteen, the age of his dead brother—that alone can maintain a tie to his mother. To grow up is to abandon her and lose her.

As an adult, Barrie struggled to love women. He had crushes on them from afar, but was curiously dead in the matter of sexual desire. Even with Sylvia, whom he worshiped, what is most evident is his need to make her dependent on him and to exert omnipotent control over her. The wish never to grow up symbolizes a deadening of erotic needs, and a rejection of oedipal struggles and rivalries, as well as adult responsibilities. As Green points out, the dead mother is felt to be ruthless in her needs; she moves in and takes over, brooking no rivals. Barrie is prohibited from truly loving another woman.

Barrie came alive only with his true love objects, his gang of boys, who were not considered rivals to his mother. But here too, they are dependent on him and he not on them; he is a ruthless dictator who has complete control. Yet when they disappear, Barrie is devastated.

Peter, too, has his gang, the Lost Boys, whom he similarly controls. The Lost Boys are another reanimation fantasy; Peter is the maternal object who nourishes them and keeps them alive. However, unlike Barrie, he has truly deadened himself; he gets rid of any of the Lost Boys who grow up, and he discards Wendy when she begins to have adult desires. For Green, the episode of Wendy's killing and the subsequent ceremony of reanimation, of bringing her back to life, is a secondary fantasy that counters the deadness found both in the locked-out son's maternal object and his own push toward deadness. But the ultimate fate of the aggression, as Green points out, is directed against the self in self-destruction and deadness. Deadening the self is the final defense against fear of abandonment and dissolution. Yet the deadness remains. Peter is left alone in the final scene at the window, Tinker Bell eventually dies, and while he has a reunion with Wendy, Peter seems to forget her as well.

A SPECTRUM OF REANIMATION AND REPARATION

The Peter Pan saga as a whole demonstrates how Green's decaathexis and Klein's paranoid fantasies can rapidly feed on and strengthen each other. Failure of one set of defenses to eliminate anxiety will trigger the other set of fantasies. The infantile mind may have more options than the ones offered by any given theory to eliminate traumatic anxiety; failure of one set of defenses will trigger an alternative set of defenses. We can think of the defensive structures of Green, which broadly try to diminish and eliminate the need for objects, and the defensive structures of Klein, which broadly try to control objects by splitting them to control the good aspects and get rid of the bad aspects, as existing synchronically with each other. Both defend against traumatic anxieties: one tries to control objects and moves toward representation, while the other progressively disavows objects and moves away from representation. Could we think of this as a spectrum of primitive defenses aimed against traumatic fears of abandonment and neglect, deadening and splitting being alternative ways to escape pain? Then we would see a similar spectrum between reanimation fantasies, secondary to recovery from deadness, and reparation fantasies,

secondary to recovery from the damage due to paranoid attacks. We can see this alternation of the dialogue between Wendy and Peter. On two occasions when Wendy starts to voice erotic interest in Peter, he becomes deadened to any desires of his own, and disavows what Wendy is feeling. When that defense fails, he switches to paranoid defenses, feeling attacked or attacking others.

CONCLUSION

Peter Pan can be understood as James Barrie's alter ego, an elaboration of Barrie's unconscious fantasies and defenses. In particular, we understand Barrie and Peter as examples of the dead mother complex described by Green. Consciously, Peter disavows any need for mothers, behind which disavowal is a deadening of any erotic need for women. In the end, he cannot feel any erotic need of his own; he is a dead boy. Peter alternates between a Kleinian urge to dominate and control his objects, and a Greenian urge to shut down and move his desires to level zero. There is an interesting contrast between Barrie and Peter. Barrie cannot in the end exist without a need for objects. When the Llewelyn Davies boys all disappear, Barrie's reanimation fantasies have failed, and he, like his mother, feels utterly abandoned, fully subject to decathexis defenses. Peter, by contrast, when deserted by Wendy, or when Tinker Bell dies, can exist at level zero. Is this Barrie's ideal?

This spectrum of defenses has clinical implications. We might see in an individual a unique mix of these two defensive strategies. Post-traumatic disorders contain a mixture of both; numbing and constriction as deadening, and dissociation and fragmentation as aspects of splitting. Blatt's distinction between anaclitic depression and introjective depression (1974) captures a difference in defensive styles. Anaclitic depression, he writes, is characterized by "intense fears of being abandoned, oral cravings, and an urgency to fill an inner emptiness," which could be understood as resulting from decathetic defenses, while introjective depression results "in intense feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, guilt, and a wish for atonement" from a harsh superego, an outcome of paranoid defenses (pp. 151–152). Barrie and his mother would have suffered from anaclitic depression. Anorexia and certain psychosomatic conditions are purer examples of decathexis.

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