

Not Now, Bernard: a Freudian fableFrederick Arthur Jack Simon 

With more than five million copies sold since its first publication in 1980, *Not Now, Bernard* by David McKee, has been read and reread by multiple generations of children and their caregivers.

Poor Bernard. Bernard is a little boy, desperate for his parents' attention. The response he repeatedly receives from his preoccupied mother and father is the gloriously indifferent 'not now, Bernard'. Increasingly frustrated, he warns his parents that there is a monster in the garden, to which the same reply rings out: 'not now, Bernard'. Bernard enters the garden, greets a monster, and is eaten by him. The monster (re)enters the house, roars at Bernard's mother and bites his father, but the reaction remains the same... 'not now, Bernard'. Unaware that Bernard has been replaced/eaten, the parents give the monster his dinner (in front of the television, alone); he is left to read a comic book (alone); and while playing (again alone), he breaks a toy. He finally takes himself to bed, and when Bernard's mother comes to switch off the light, he protests: 'but I'm a monster'. The mother responds with the inevitable: 'not now, Bernard'. It is at this point that it becomes clear: Bernard is the monster, and the monster is Bernard.

In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936) Anna Freud introduces the joint concepts of projection and identification. The effect of these two mechanisms is to 'break the connection between ideational representatives of dangerous impulses and the ego'. Bernard knows he is not supposed to roar and bite: this behaviour is prohibited by his developing superego. But he simultaneously desires the love and attention of his parents: this is the instinctual wish. For Bernard, the displacement of his instinctual impulses onto the monster allows him to circumvent the superego and behave in a way he knows is forbidden. The monster is the embodiment/infantile representation of Bernard's concept of a naughty child. Through this process of projection, Bernard is able to protect himself from the scorn of his own superego demands, while simultaneously gratifying his instinctual desires.

The power of *Not Now, Bernard* lies in the space left for identification. Children reading the book are able to identify with the monster. In doing so they learn that the pursuit of their forbidden instinctual desires (even through monstrous behaviour) is not as dangerous as they fear. Even if the child-reader behaves like a monster, they will still be loved by their caregivers. Like the monster in the book, they will be given their milk and put to bed like normal.

Anna Freud writes that 'despite the prohibition of the superego', the mechanism of projection and identification liberates the 'inhibited activity and aggression primarily designed to secure fulfilment of the instinctual wishes'. Or to summarise: 'but I'm a monster'... 'not now, Bernard'.

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