

His Dark Materials

– Dæmons and the Child ego state

CLAIRE BOWERS analyses connections between early Child adaptations and the shape-shifting dæmon, exploring its creative use in the therapy room

I BEGAN TO read 'His Dark Materials' (Philip Pullman) having been captivated by the BBC dramatisation. The opening of the first book reads 'Lyra and her dæmon moved through the darkening Hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen.' (Pullman, 1995/2015, p. 3). I was instantly hooked and intrigued as to what a dæmon was. My own Religious Parent (Milnes, 2017) stirred!

Dæmons are the external manifestation of a person's soul, taking the form of an animal and reflecting the character of their human counterpart. The concept of dæmons appealed to me, not just as an indication of that character's inner self but also due to what the characters learn from and about their dæmons. Humans and dæmons share a bond that is emotional and affective. There are times when dæmons externally demonstrate what the character may be thinking, feeling, or experiencing.

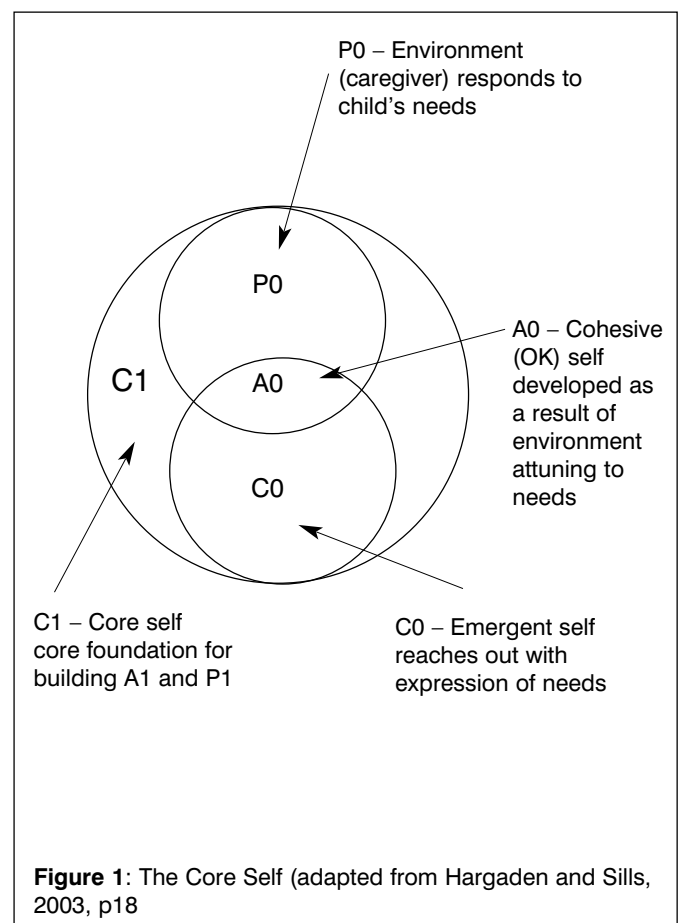
Throughout this article I will make reference to the Child ego state, the relational view of Hargaden and Sills (2003) and Self-Object needs (Kohut, 1977) which 'enable a person to maintain self-experience and develop autonomy' (Hargaden & Sills, 2002, p. 51). I will also consider the ways in which bullying can challenge an already fragile sense of self and the way in which the dæmon metaphor may be used to personify the Child ego state while demonstrating how I have used this with clients.

The Child ego state, the Core Self and dæmons

Daniel Stern defines the Core Self as 'the sense of being an integrated, distinct, coherent body with control over his own actions, ownerships of his own affectivity [and] a sense of continuity' (Stern, 1985, p99).

Hargaden and Sills (2003) discuss the importance of attuned interaction between the Emergent Self (C0) and the environment/primary caregiver (P0). Sufficient attunement will result in the development of a cohesive sense of Self (fig 1). This sense of Self is 'held' within C1 – the Core Self – and provides a secure (or, sadly,

insecure) foundation on which A1 (intersubjective and verbal self) and P1 (internal object representation) – the way in which a child makes sense of himself/others/world – are built. Likewise, insufficient attunement (or mis-attunement/trauma) will result in the child splitting these less desirable aspects of self/other, resulting in shame-based beliefs about self and/or negative beliefs and representations of others. This is referred to as the 'Schizoid Process' (Yontef, 2001; Hargaden & Sills, 2002).



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This process can be uncomfortable and frightening for clients. I believe the use of creative and descriptive imagery can help them make sense of this, creating their own narrative to aid the integration process of the Child ego state.

Making sense of and adapting to the world

In childhood, dæmons shift between animal forms, at times in response to the environment or circumstances they find themselves in. This may be totally out of awareness of their human counterparts and without explicit knowledge of the animals in question.

“‘I remember being a mole”, said Geraint ... “When I was frightened I used to be a mole.””

“But how did you know about moles?” said Malcolm.

“You just feel moleish” said Asta’. (Pullman, 2017, p231)

Reflecting on this, I began to consider the dæmon to be akin to the Child ego state.

In the same way as the children’s dæmons adapt and shift, it could be argued that the pathology of the Child ego state leads to similar adaptation and shifting.

Hargaden and Sills (2002) discuss adaptation to the injunctive (counterscript) messages of parent figures, depending on their sense of ‘OKness’. They discuss the feelings of shame held in A1- and C1 when a child feels a ‘not OK’ sense of self, arguing that when attuned repair and forgiveness takes place, the child is able to integrate both A1+ and A1- messages into a cohesive sense of self.

I see the shape shifting of dæmons, who do not settle into their final form until the human reaches maturity, as an effective metaphor for the adaptation and change that takes place within the Child ego state while a sense of self is created and wonder to what extent the metaphorical inability to settle on a ‘final dæmon form’ could indicate dissatisfaction or uncertainty of self.

With this in mind, and driven by my excitement of reading the books, I found myself asking clients who had read the books to tell me about their own dæmon – their own Child ego state. There were times at which clients would talk about a ‘haziness’ or an ‘uncertainty’ when trying to visualise their dæmon. I began to think more deeply about the concept of self-discontentment and uncertainty which is explored within the books.

When questioned about the form in which dæmon’s settle, a sailor states:

‘Knowing what kind of person you are. Take old

Belisaria. She’s a seagull, and that means I’m a kind of seagull too. I’m not grand and splendid nor beautiful, but I’m a tough old thing and I can survive anywhere and always find a bit of food and company. . . and when your dæmon settles, you’ll know the sort of person you are.’

‘But suppose your dæmon settles in a shape you don’t like?’

‘Well, then, you’re discontented, en’t you? There’s plenty of folk as’d like to have a lion as a dæmon and they end up with a poodle. And till they learn to be satisfied with what they are, they’re going to be fretful about it. Waste of feeling, that is.’ (Pullman, 1995/2015, p187)

I began to wonder what would happen if you, or someone else, was dissatisfied with who you were and how this could potentially lead to separation from your Self.

Loss of contact with self

Within the books, the contact between human and dæmon is very strong with intense pain at separation.

‘The pain is agonising, almost indescribable, completely imperious and commanding. . . a sort of heart deep anguish and sorrow, a sickness, a fear, a despair almost unto death.’ (Pullman, 2019, p76)

However, there are certain characters within the book series who can spend more time apart from their dæmons. These include witches and shamans, who undertake healthy separation, akin to that described by Yontef (2001) in his work on the schizoid process, who states that ‘a spiritual retreat is a healthy example of separation from ordinary contact’ (p8). Their initial separation can still be hugely painful – which interested me greatly considering the personal therapy and development that we, as therapists, partake in to understand ourselves and ethically support others.

Yontef observes that ‘Ideally, the movement between contact and withdrawal is governed by emerging need’ (Yontef, 2001, p8), stating that ‘at one unhealthy extreme the individual separates and isolates to the point of losing a sense of being humanly bonded.’ This unhealthy separation, losing contact with self and other could be compared to the process of ‘intercision’ within the books.

Although, it emerges, there are various methods of separation between human and dæmon in different ‘worlds’, in Lyra’s world, ‘intercision’ is the process by which a dæmon is intentionally cut away. Generally, this will cause death as a person cannot live without their inner self. Intercision is an unthinkable form of abuse. Yontef describes this isolation from and within the core self as terror inducing pain stating that ‘total isolation [from or within the core self] or abandonment is like death, especially for the young child’ (Yontef, 2001, p10).

In my mind, this links to the lack of integration and resultant impermeable division in A1+/A1- and P1+/P1-

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as described by Hargaden and Sills (fig 2). Such a presentation would result in a person moving to A1- or P1- positions when they feel ‘not OK’ (Hargaden & Sills, 2002, p23). Yontef (2001, p10) describes this as the ‘loss of the sense of self as a living person’, observing that ‘such individuals usually appear detached, solitary, distant, undemonstrative, and cold.’

Characters who experience the loss of their dæmon

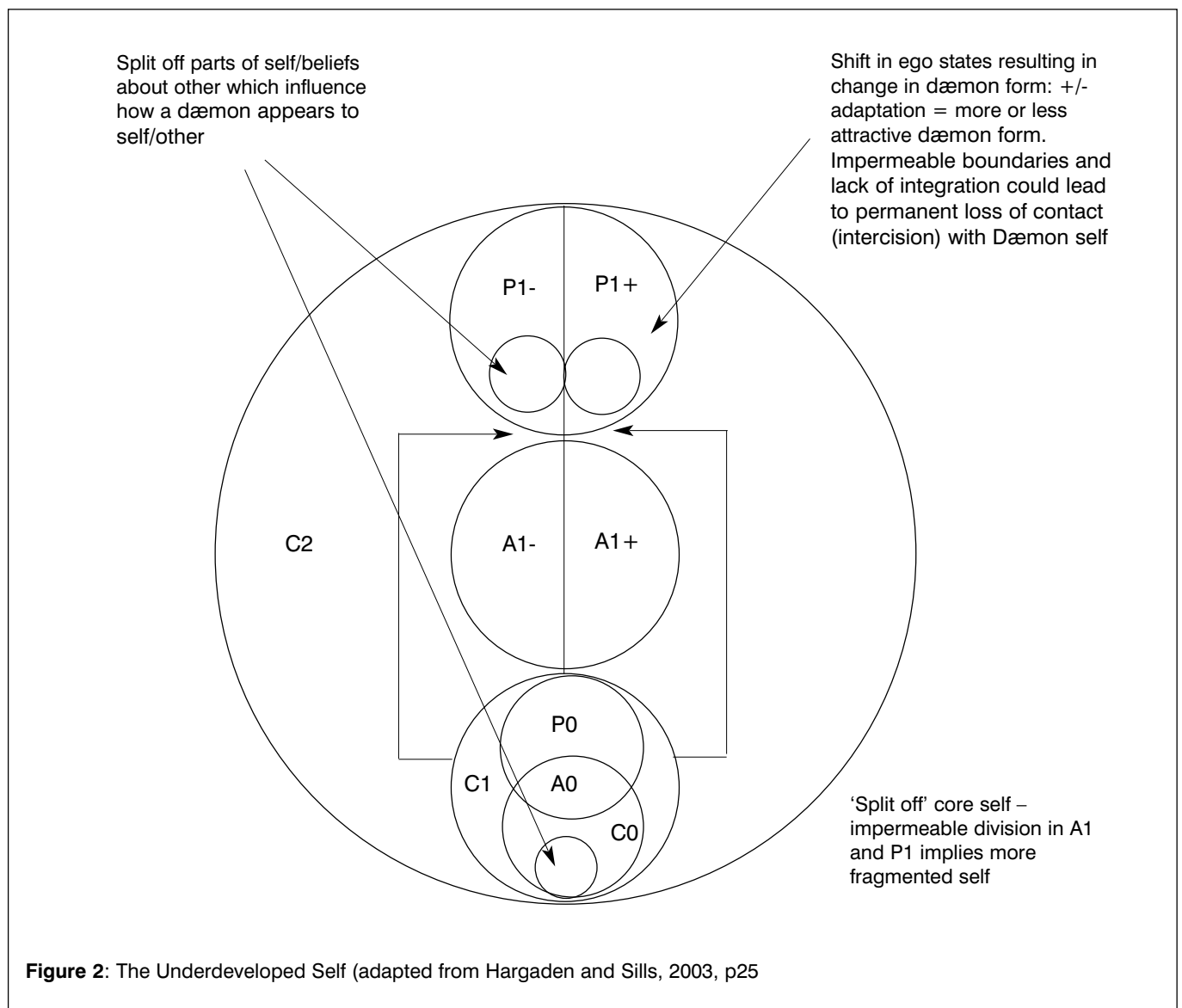
within the books are described in a similar way.

Speaking of Tullio, who is attacked by Spectres (dæmon eaters), Pullman makes the following description:

‘...he turned away and began to run his hands along the stones in the wall, looking closely at each one, counting them, feeling the edges, hunching up his shoulders as if warding off something behind him, shaking his head ... Lyra realised with a jolt of sickness what was happening; the man was being attacked by Spectres ... Tullio was lost’. (Pullman, 1998/2015, p. 248)

As mentioned earlier, it is also possible (although often unthinkable) for humans to intentionally separate from their own dæmons. Below is a description of the characters Lyra and Will choosing to separate themselves from, and leave behind their own dæmons:

‘Will could hardly watch. Lyra was doing the cruellest



thing she had ever done, hating herself, hating the deed. . . Time after time she pushed her dæmon away and still he cried and tried to cling. . .

'What animal he [the dæmon] was now, Will could hardly tell. He seemed to be so young, a cub, a puppy, something helpless and beaten, a creature so sunk in misery that it was more misery than creature. . .

'it felt as if an iron hand has gripped his heart and was pulling it out between his ribs. . . something secret and private was being dragged into the open where it had no wish to be, and Will was nearly overcome by a mixture of pain and shame and fear.' (Pullman, 2000/2015, p386)

This description felt like a representation of the deep and, at times toxic, shame potentially experienced by clients with the schizoid process described above. Moving into the A1-/P1- positions, Yontef observes that such clients are 'especially contemptuous of their own weak (needy) self' (Yontef, 2001, p12). In extreme cases, this is described in the book as the unthinkable process of 'Dæmon Harm' (Self Harm).

"'He's hitting her ... " whispered Asta, unable to believe it.

"Never ... " she whispered.

"Never thought we'd ever see anything like that," he finished for her ...

"He must hate her," he said. "I can't imagine.'" (Pullman, 2017, p. 207)

Dæmons and bullying

Although bullying is not directly explored in *His Dark Materials*, there are descriptions of character's dæmons attacking each other. "...only a few seconds and the monkey had overmastered him: with one fierce black paw around his throat and his back paws gripping the polecat's lower limbs, he took one of Pantalaimon's ears in his other paw and pulled as if he intended to tear it off ... Lyra sobbed in terror. "Don't! Please! Stop hurting us!" (Pullman, 1995/2015, p. 98).

A client described the way the school bullying she had experienced reaffirmed the injunctive messages of 'don't be you' and 'don't exist' received in childhood. To defend against these messages, she had adapted. She fully strived to 'be perfect' and 'try hard' in school, describing her dæmon as a show dog who paraded around, winning prizes, but feeling incredibly insecure deep down.

This insecurity had been picked up on by other children and the very defences she used against these injunctions had then led to the injunctions coming to the surface again through bullying.

I would argue that using the metaphor of dæmons, the OK- dæmon of the bullying child was attacking the OK- dæmon of the bullied child; the undigested (Klein in Hargaden & Sills, 2002, p19), shame based experiences held in P1- of the bullying child were being projected onto that of the bullied child.

Reconnecting with Self

Following separating from her dæmon, Lyra endures a long and painful journey of finding and reconnecting with him. For clients who have lost contact with their Selves – their Child ego states – this can also be a long and painful journey, requiring trust in the therapist as an attuned 'other'. Hargaden and Sills (2002) observe that where this fragmentation has taken place, healing and integration can only happen where the 'therapist is willing to "hear" the non-narratable story that arises from the internal world of the infant.' (p28)

Using a variation of Adrienne Lee's Mirror Exercise (2018) as a starting point provides an effective tool for enabling clients to begin to visualise their dæmon. I would argue that, although it is helpful for clients to have read the books, this can also be done by explaining to clients that their dæmon is an external, animal representation of their inner selves that is able to help them understand what they may be thinking or feeling. I would emphasise the importance of clients' willingness to engage in such work and the importance of effective contracting to prepare for this.

Clients may be unaware of the form their dæmons may take and may require (and desire) a couple of opportunities to explore this visualisation. Much like the Mirror Exercise proper, this may bring to light aspects of self that clients are unaware of and sufficient care should be taken within this. It is important that a secure and trusting therapeutic relationship is in place prior to this to avoid feelings of extreme exposure or risks of shame for clients.

The transcript below details an example of how I have carried out this activity, using the Mirror Exercise as a starting point. Another way of leading into this activity is to make use of visualisation exercises as presented by (DeFoore, 2010), audio transcripts of which can be found at [icscript.pdf](https://www.icscript.pdf) ([defoore.com](https://www.defoore.com)).

Therapist: *Are you able to tell me what your dæmon looks like?*

Client: *He is hazy ... kind of moving in and out of focus – he is behind a tree.*

Therapist: *Would he like to come out?*

Client: *I think so. I think he is a squirrel but I can't see him properly.*

Therapist: *What happens if we wait?*

Client: *[Pauses] I can see him looking at me. He is nervous, actually, but I think he wants to play ...*

The above example led to further explorations of this client's dæmon in future sessions and eventually led to being able to carry out the full mirror exercise enabling the client to provide himself with permissions to explore, play, have fun and test out boundaries and expectations!

Kohut (1977) discusses the psychological strivings of twinning, mirroring and idealising where C0 has reached out and not been met affectively or in attunement by P0.

Following discovering and personifying their dæmon, and bringing into awareness a previously excluded Child ego state, I believe that possibilities for the therapist to enter fully into the relationship with the client will arise, leading to deconfusion within the transference relationship described by Hargaden and Sills (2002).

Conclusion

The *His Dark Materials* books provide a useful metaphor for the Child ego state in their description of dæmons – the external representation of a person's Inner Self. If we hold the metaphor of the dæmon as central here, it could be argued that the attunement between child (C0) and caregiver/environment (P0) leads to development of a cohesive sense of self (A0), where the child develops self-esteem, confidence and can tolerate their own deep feelings (Hargaden & Sills, 2002). The child has the confidence to try out different dæmon forms in response to the environment in which they find themselves. 'Her dæmon became a squirrel like Geraint and chattered with glee. "She's really clever," said Malcolm. He was full of admiration.' (Pullman, 2017, p332) This attunement and confidence, much like our understanding of the development of C1, leads to the dæmon settling in a form that the child is content with – and reflects who they are in a positive way.

A lack of a secure Sense of Self could be compared to poor contact with your dæmon, a painful process in the books which can be likened to both abuse by others and abuse by self. Much like our understanding of the process of therapy to regain contact with Self, the process of reconnecting with your dæmon can be long and painful, requiring a trusting relationship with an attuned and responsive other.

I believe the dæmon metaphor can be a valuable tool in supporting clients to explore and regain contact with their Core Selves and can already feel myself beginning to explore this further. Bring on the final book!

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Claire Bowers is a Liverpool based contractual trainee. As a former early years teacher and parent to young children she enjoys combining her love for TA with creative techniques. www.clairebowerspsychotherapy.com