

CHAPTER ONE

It begins with the (key) character.

There is thus Narcissism, misrecognition and alienation
in the moment of the mirror.¹

Characters constitute much of the pleasure of sitcoms through gags, jokes and comic performance. Often categorized as “types” such as The Hedonist, The Idiot Savant, The Operator, or depicted as recognizable stereotypes such as the effeminate male or harridan housewife, many are descendants of archetypal ancestors, in particular the fool, trickster, truth-teller, rogue and the comic hero. Such descriptors explain to some degree a character’s comicality, but not the character’s perpetual entrapment, a marked characteristic of the sitcom.

Bergson defines the comic character as an unconscious victim – the disjunction between how the character sees him/her self and the reality within which they exist generates comicality. To better understand the comic characters’ unconscious, we now dissect the psychological nature of the sitcom character to elucidate why they remain ‘trapped’ in the situation from which they attempt to escape yet repeatedly fail. I observe the characters from two Australian comedies, *Pizza* and *Kath & Kim*, the British classic *Fawlty Towers* alongside Patricia Mellencamp’s analysis of the American classic *I Love Lucy* to view them as suffering some degree of narcissistic disorder that precipitates an identity at odds with the world within which they exist.² In seeking to understand the dynamics of the character’s behavior rather than determine why the character has those characteristics, I begin with the proposition that the comic character is an unconscious victim, full of hubris, they harbor some degree of narcissism. Freudian Psychoanalytic theory assists in understanding the traits of narcissistic behavior. By examining such traits – or extremes of the continuum of what is normal, this chapter locates the psychological disorder the comic character appears to manifest, and thus nuances what instantiates the sitcom character’s view of themselves and the world around them. Post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory further assists by articulating how identity is constructed, and how such construction contributes to certain behavior.

Narcissism is central to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic thinking; seen as part of ego maturation it structures identity and the way the subject engages with the external world.

¹ Robert Stam et al., *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 129.

² Patricia Mellencamp, ‘Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,’ *Critiquing the Sitcom* ed. Joanne Morreale (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 41-55. *Pizza*, created by Paul Fenech, produced by SBSTV and Paul Fenech (Australia: SBS, 2000-2006). *Kath & Kim*, created and written by Gina Riley & Jane Turner, produced by ABCTV, later Riley Turner Productions (Australia: ABC, 2002-2004, ATN7 2007). *Fawlty Towers*, created and written by John Cleese & Connie Booth, produced by BBC (Britain: BBC, 1975-1976). *I Love Lucy*, written by Jess Oppenheimer, Madelyn Davis, Bob Carroll Jr., Bob Schiller and Bob Weiskopf, produced by Desilu Productions (USA: CBS, 1951-1961).

It is a difficult and complex psychological notion that cannot be simply defined as bad or delusional behavior. The term derives from the Greek myth of Narcissus, translated by the Roman writer Ovid in 8 AD: Narcissus is the hunter-youth in love with his mirror-image, his self-love enabled by an adoring mother, reinforced by the disembodied nymph, Echo. The myth enables a reading of the characters in the sitcom as being a derivative of either Narcissus or the little mentioned Echo.

For Jacques Lacan three psychic registers operate in the development of identity: the Imaginary, the site of primary identification (the mirror stage) and ego formation, the Symbolic as the register of the social, and the Real, located beyond the Symbolic, the site of anxiety and trauma. To be accepted in the social an individual can either surrender his/her desire or seek to have their desire satisfied by compensating it in return for recognition in the social. It is the desire to be recognized in the Symbolic that can generate anxiety in the Real; thus the 'law of desire' is betrayed through the adoption of the socio-symbolic. Characters such as Lucy, Basil and Kim strive to attain an identity in the social and thus the Symbolic, yet fail, leading to the supposition that they are simultaneously caught in an entrapment of which they are unaware. As such this chapter is concerned with the comic character's psychical construction born of the Imaginary and their ego in the 'mirror stage,' the conflict, tension or anxiety driven by their desire, and imposed by the Real that they then experience in the Symbolic. While desire is determined in psychoanalysis compensating for some lack, I offer through Kristyn Gorton's theorizing, also enables motivation.³

John Reddick's translation of Freud's 1914 paper 'On the Introduction of Narcissism,' along with Lacan's schema of psychical and ego maturation provide a theoretical framework for this undertaking.⁴ Patricia Mellencamp's reading of the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy* enables further exploration of the character's unconscious entrapment within what she describes as a "discursive containment."⁵ Furthermore and by mobilizing the concept of 'echoing,' my aim is to understand the nature of dependency between (comic) characters and how such relationships both affect a sense of self and behavior in the social. In doing so I deduce that some characters have psychical constructions that embody both Narcissus and Echo.

1.1 – Narcissism and the comic character.

What constitutes the ego and its development is the central concern for theories of narcissism both within psychoanalysis and in analytical psychology. As a term in every day usage, narcissism is often used to describe the shallowness and self-absorption of modern individuals whose characteristics tend toward pathological or extreme modes of behavior. Narcissistic traits and their extremities are further defined by social expectations and codes. And while a common view of a narcissist is someone who is grandiose with a sense of self-importance, "specialness," entitlement, preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love, those afflicted with this personality disorder are often

³ *Theorising Desire. From Freud to Feminism to Film* (Palgrave MacMillan: Hampshire and New York, 2008).

⁴ Freud, 'On the Introduction of Narcissism,' 1914, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick (London: Penguin Classics, 2003) 1-30. Although slightly different to the title by Strachey, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction,' Reddick argues that his title is closer to Freud's focus of the paper.

⁵ Mellencamp, 'Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,' *ibid*.

arrogant, selfish, and verbose, along with an incapacity to love others or show, even experience empathy.⁶ However narcissism is essential to both ego maturation and identity formation – it's what gets us out of bed each day to achieve our goals.

Freud initially defines narcissism as a state of “oneness” with the world, where boundaries between the subject and the external world and its ‘objects,’ including the mother as the primary love-object, are blurred. Using the term “his majesty the baby,” Freud suggests that the indulgence of the individual and its infantile view of the world arrests psychological development, feeding feelings of omnipotence and grandiosity and which the individual not only seeks to maintain, he/she refuses to surrender; humans are “incapable of forgoing gratification once they have enjoyed it,”⁷ and the narcissistic perfection of their childhood which they are unable to retain, is retrieved through idealization and ego-ideals. As such ego defenses are created as a way of retaining those early experiences.

Most theories of narcissism focus on the construction of the self and/or the ego, the relationship between the ego and the libido, and how the ego attaches itself to objects to exist and develop in the external world. It is on this point that debate is commonly centered: what determines a pathological state? Object relations theory focuses on how the subject develops through its “attachment” (or not) to objects rather than libidinal drives which Freud sees as something to be controlled because the dammed up libidinal energy, in the failure of satisfaction, needs to be cathected elsewhere. As such it creates a ‘lack’, and which needs to be fulfilled. Theorist D.W. Winnicott offers that it is from experiencing some degree of omnipotence that the subject develops a sense of self and in a lack of omnipotence (in the early years) compels the ego to perpetually seek out experiences to fulfill that lack often enabled through power and its need that has not been normatively experienced.⁸ In listing birds of prey, even criminals and comic heroes as examples of the unassailable ego, Freud asserts we envy the narcissistic posturing of such types as reflections of our own surrendered narcissism. Moreover, the narcissistic ego enables both the achievement of the ego's desires as well as protection of the ego suffering from some lack or trauma. The defense created by the ego is born of some ‘lack,’ rather than fulfillment. Despite the differing views of how pathologies take hold, there is general agreement among many theorists, including Freud, that an unresolved Oedipus complex lie at the heart of narcissistic disorders.

As the ego forms in response to identification with the primary caregiver, the subject develops an idealization (or ‘ideal ego’) of themselves whilst simultaneously ‘mirroring’ those around them to have their needs gratified. The central issue becomes the nature of early relationships which determine the degree of pathology and attachment (or not), to objects, including significant others; this is the basis of object-relations theory. Freud assists in seeing how a character's ideal ego drives them to achieve their goals, observing that the narcissist aims to “keep at bay anything tending to diminish their ego.”⁹ If the comic character is rooted in a pre or oedipal phase of maturation, as demonstrated by Susan Purdie,¹⁰ understanding

⁶ American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) DSM-5 (Washington, DC and London: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013).

⁷ Freud, ‘On the Introduction of Narcissism,’ *ibid.*, 20-22.

⁸ D. W. Winnicott, *Home is Where We Start From* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), see pages 30, 92 and 229.

⁹ Freud, ‘On the Introduction of Narcissism,’ *ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰ Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

how narcissistic traits affect behavior, particularly when an unstable ego is under threat, helps understand motivation and the nature of the character's relationships. It is not the cause of the pathology that is of interest rather how narcissistic traits affect behavior and the comic character's engagement with reality.

Primary or early stage narcissism is determined by the drives of the pleasure principle and its primary processes such as "wish-fulfilling fantasies and the need for immediate instinctual discharge irrespective of its appropriateness";¹¹ as the individual matures, their ego develops in response to the external world and its reality, utilizing secondary processes such as determination, focus, cohesion and intelligibility to achieve their goals, engaging the mental function of the reality principle. Having erected an ego defense the subject then pours their libido into secondary processes to maintain the ego-ideal as a means of maintaining ego stability. However, and if the maturation process along with the desiring ego is thwarted, the ego becomes captured by its primary processes. Lisa Trahair observes that "the comic is nothing other than the operations of primary process that have managed to force their way through to consciousness ... [t]he pleasure principle is still operative in the secondary process, but it has been modified to the extent that it takes into account the development of the psyche and the existence of the external world."¹² When under stress, the individual engages with the world and its reality through those primary processes; they can function but the ego is in a regressed state. What Trahair offers is that not only does the pleasure principle operate in the secondary process, in doing so the full range of secondary processes are not engaged. In other words, secondary process thinking is harnessed in order to achieve primary process and its desires. If the ego-ideal has been created as a narcissistic defense, then the subject views the external world from an infantile perspective and engages with it on that level. Differentiating between primary and secondary process assists in understanding the response of characters such as Pauly from *Pizza* when their magnification is under threat. Before looking at *Pizza* we need to better understand how narcissism takes hold in the psyche and more importantly arrests ego maturation.

As the ego emerges from the state of primary or infantile narcissism, it experiences several stages. The key one is the Oedipus complex, which occurs around three to five years of age when it is generally considered to be "resolved." Some theorists suggest its resolution may occur as late as ten years of age. The pre-oedipal period has phases or stages such as oral, anal and phallic. During this period the relationship with the mother or primary caregiver is dyadic. The oedipal moment occurs when the two-way relationship expands into a three-sided relationship to include the father. Robert Stam writes that "The Oedipal complex signals the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, from the familial order to society at large ... Freud uses this schema to describe the processes by which the child develops a unified sense of self (an EGO) and takes up a particular place in the cultural networks of social, sexual and familial relations."¹³ Dylan Evans clarifies the resolution of

¹¹ Freud, 'Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning,' *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 301-308. Eda Goldstein, *Ego Psychology and Social Work Practice* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 62-63.

¹² Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy. Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 176-177.

¹³ Stam et al, *ibid.*, 131.

this complex as “the passage from the imaginary order to the symbolic order”¹⁴ by way of language, enabling the integration into culture. As Lacan’s work hinges on an alliance between language, the unconscious, parents, the symbolic order and cultural relations, if we have language, we have an unconscious; if we master language we master the unconscious as Purdie argues. The mastery of language can also be a means by which to deny the unconscious and in doing so can be both a means of defense and the door that reveals. More pertinently, an unresolved Oedipus complex traps the subject in repressed feelings of anger or love toward an object, initially the parent/s and siblings, later substituted by representatives of those objects. As Ivan Ward notes and quoting Lacan, “[O]ur view is that the essential function of the ego is very nearly that systematic refusal to acknowledge reality...”¹⁵

For Andrew Horton characters that populate New Comedy articulate an oedipal resolution, having transgressed from the dual, nature-based, pre-oedipal phase to the symbolic and cultural phase of the post-oedipal stage; characters in Old Comedy by contrast are anarchistic and reflect the (repressed) aggression of the pre-oedipal phase of duality.¹⁶ However in the complex not being resolved, and depending on the degree of the repression and during which phase it occurs, the individual generates an idealized view of themselves as a form of defense from those conflicts stemming from fear and desire that have not been worked through. The individual becomes attached to a ‘narcissistic’ view, at the extreme end retreating into fantasy (itself born of phantasy) as a form of defense; coupled with experiences of power lays the ground for the unassailable ego. It is important at this point to explain the behavioral ramifications of the unassailable and narcissistic ego, so we can fully grasp how the character in the comedies under examination play out as narcissistic personality disorders in identifiably symptomatic ways.

For Otto Kernberg narcissistic behavior results from a disturbance in ego structure derived from disturbed ‘object-relations,’ most commonly with primary care-givers as a defense in response to a lack of love, acceptance and nurturing.¹⁷ Similarly, for Robert D. Stolorow, narcissism is a function that enables the subject to maintain a sense of self through object-relations: “[t]he object performs basic functions in the realm of self-esteem regulation that the individual’s own psyche is unable to provide.” Like a thermostat that regulates room temperature, narcissism is, for Stolorow, a function to regulate self-esteem. Stolorow also proposes that “a narcissistic object relationship ... is to maintain the cohesiveness, stability and positive affective coloring of the self-representation.”¹⁸ It is not only the relationship with the love-object, a physical object such as a prop, can also have the same regulating (and comic) effect. A good example is Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* and his attachment to (actual) objects and compulsive behavior that enable him to function, providing the root of

¹⁴ *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 127.

¹⁵ Ivan Ward, ‘TV Times at the Freud Museum,’ *Television and Psychoanalysis. Psycho-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Caroline Bainbridge, Ivan Ward, Candida Yates (London: Karnac Books, 2014), p. 179.

¹⁶ Andrew Horton, *Writing the Character-Centered Screenplay* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 42-3.

¹⁷ Otto Kernberg, ‘Factors in the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personalities,’ in *Essential Papers on Narcissism*, ed. Andrew P. Morrison (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 213-244.

¹⁸ Robert Stolorow, ‘Towards a Functional Definition of Narcissism,’ *Essential Papers on Narcissism*, *ibid.*, 201.

much comedy when that ‘stability’ is disrupted.¹⁹ Similarly Robert Blumenfeld marries unresolved oedipal issues at various stages of maturation with types of characters, particularly comic characters such as Harpagon.²⁰ Pauly from the Australian comedy *Pizza* is a good example of such a character.

Pizza is centered on the lives of a group of ethnic pizza delivery drivers who work for the abusive and management-challenged Bobo, himself the target of abuse by his heavy-jeweled and made-up “Mama.” In the episode titled “Small and Large Pizza” Pauly has his beloved Valiant car confiscated and sent to the scrap heap as a result of a number of driving offences.²¹ The magistrate booms down from the bench: “Furthermore due to a technicality in the law that prevents me from cancelling your license, I am restricting your engine capacity to 50cc” (the capacity of a lawnmower). By a stroke of luck (or narrative coincidence) Pauly wins a radio competition and so is able to pay the fine. He celebrates his victory accordingly, standing at the judicial bench he cheekily declares: “Sucked in to you judge, sucked in.” Such characters are not only narcissistic and aggressive, they seek to attack or at least manipulate the Symbolic and those who represent it, especially if thwarted in their desires and goals.

The significance of Freud’s 1914 paper on Narcissism is how it theorizes the identity of the individual driven by instinctual demands that are then shaped by, and reflected back, through the environment in which they develop. When the idealized ego or ego-ideal is born of a narcissistic defense of the ego, then, as we have seen, the subject matures utilizing secondary processes to serve the ego-ideal, rather than the emergent ego. In such cases then, narcissism as a process of ego maturation becomes the basis for identity formation and development.

Pauly tells his mates in the next scene: “That judge, he tried to stooge me, so I stooged him back”; he proceeds to demonstrate how he has modified the car in order to maintain his status as a “hoon.” Amongst his many modifications, Pauly has camouflaged a can of “sik nitrus” to boost engine capacity and moved the now enlarged engine to the boot to accommodate the subwoofers under the bonnet. This character is skilled at altering the small car to meet his needs. When threatened with its loss Pauly laughs tendentiously at the law; his need to maintain his identity (through that object in particular) determines his actions. This character exhibits a focused, self-centered view of the world, coupled with a sense of entitlement, denying certain realities to maintain his (primary) ego desires; he sees life as a game to be mastered and rejects anything that thwarts him and in particular his image and status. Pauly’s identity is formed through the car as object (and indeed prop) and affirms his status and, as we will see, its power as a chick-magnet. We can surmise that the comic character is ‘narcissistic’ to the extent that he/she has an “unassailable ego” structured by the ego’s desire and which has not been satisfied at an earlier stage.

¹⁹ *The Big Bang Theory*, created by Chuck Lorre & Bill Prady, produced by Chuck Lorre Productions et al. (USA: CBS, 2007-present).

²⁰ *Tools and Techniques for Character Interpretation: A Handbook of Psychology for Actors, Writers and Directors* (New Jersey: Limelight Editions, 2006).

²¹ “Small and Large Pizza,” written by Paul Fenech, series 4, episode 2, *Pizza*, *ibid.*, first transmitted June 13, 2005.

Heinz Kohut defines a person with a narcissistic personality disorder as “an individual in whom the cohesion of the self or of the idealized self-object is fragile.”²² The self is threatened with ‘disintegration’ when their narcissistic ego defense is weakened. I discuss Kohut’s work in greater detail in the next chapter and both Kohut and Stolorow assist in recognizing the role and importance of an ‘object’ in gaining a sense of self which can also be a form of ego defense as we see with Pauly: the car becomes an object through which he is able to express both his self-image and how he wishes the world to see him. Narcissism can then be viewed as a combination of ego maturation, a mode of object-relations, as well as, to varying degrees, a crutch for self-esteem. Thus, the *object*, be it person, prop or a strictly adhered timetable, will become significant for the comic character if it is essential to their idealization and more pertinently ego stability.

In defining the ego-ideal, Freud argues that libidinal instinctual impulses undergo repression if they are in conflict with cultural and ethical ideas, originating in the family and reinforced by the wider society. Ego-ideals result “from the coming together of narcissism ... and identification with the parents, with their substitutes or with collective ideals.”²³ The ego-ideal is something to which the subject conforms, while the ideal ego is a collective ideal (of parents, family, teachers, class and nation) to which the subject aspires. This combination explains Freud’s original oscillation between the ego-ideal as something to aspire to as well as someone who is critical and judgmental. Indeed, for Freud idealization and prohibition are bound together in one. Lacan further defines the Ego-Ideal as being formed by the introjection of values and desires from the Symbolic through an Other, whereas for him the ideal ego is the source of an idealized projection from the subject onto the Symbolic formed out of relationships and, importantly, may not be how the Other sees the subject. The ideal ego engenders an image while the ego-ideal supplies the point from which one is viewed; in Freud’s second topography of the psyche this agency becomes the critical super-ego.

The Australian sitcom and satirical parody *Kath & Kim* (mentioned in the Introduction) is a good example of a mother-daughter relationship that has a double-edged sword. In the episode “The Moon,”²⁴ Kath and daughter Kim are wandering through the local shopping mall, when Kim, a large-framed woman who defines herself as a “hornbag” (Australian slang for a very sexy lady), spies a peasant style blouse: “Oh mum mum, look at this, that peasant blouse. That’s nice.” Kath: “Is that peasant or pirate Kim?” “Oh Pirate! You’re so five-minutes ago, its peasant.” They continue:

Kath: Peasant. Mmm, that’s you isn’t it?

Kim: (nodding) Yees.

Kath: Yes, there’s nothing more flattering I feel than a puffy-sleeve on a big lass.

Kim: Yeah, I might get it.

Kath: Good idea, cover your fedubedas and your tum.

Kim: (vehemently) Oh, anything else I need to cover up?

²² Heinz Kohut, *The Chicago Institute Lectures*, ed. Paul Tolpin and Marian Tolpin (Hillsdale and London: The Analytic Press, 1996), 37.

²³ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books 2006), 144.

²⁴ “The Moon,” written by Gina Riley and Jane Turner, series 2, episode 3, *Kath & Kim*, *ibid.*, first transmitted October 2, 2003.

Kath: Well there's your welcome mat, your love handles and your dowagers hump, Kim.

Kim: Mum!

Kath: 'umour, I'm using 'umour. Now go and get it. Come on.

Kim's belief that she is a hornbag and fashionista is constantly under attack by Kath, whose stream of criticism about Kim's weight, hair and clothes is not only unrelenting and may also be a form of defense in the face of the continued verbal onslaught. When her magnification is threatened, Kim responds with anger or denial (compared with Pauly who uses trickery and deception). Here the character's ego-ideal of being a fashionista, formed by both a projection of an idealized self and that of a significant 'other,' is used to deny the onslaught of critical comments, fired shrapnel-like at her self-esteem.

As the subject aspires to a model based on the need to be accepted by parents, teachers and society, the ego-ideal is then projected onto the future as a surrogate for that which was lost (or not received) in childhood. Ego-ideals, as a means of securing love and acceptance by significant others, can be determined by both desire (to be seen/loved) and fear (of not being loved/seen). If so then ideal egos are the projection of the subject based on idealizations, while ego-ideals are formed on the desire to be accepted by the love-object. This could be the basis of psychical tension and form an ego defense that instantiates denial. In short, the comic character may be caught in a bind between who they think they are (or want to be) and how the Other 'sees' them; if at odds with their ego-ideal in the attempt to move into the Symbolic they become trapped in a struggle.

1.2 – *The comic character's struggle.*

Week after week, the show keeps Lucy happily in her confined domestic, sitcom place after a twenty-three-minute tour-de-force struggle to escape.²⁵

Patricia Mellencamp initially interprets the comic performances of Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Gracie Allen in *The Burns and Allen Show*, both popular sitcoms of the late 1950s, through feminist theory, only to find that the comic refuses to be comprehended within modern critical models.²⁶ The bind for Mellencamp is that in an attempt to link Lucy's entrapment with comic performance and by reading the program through an ideological framework, she is, in the end, unable to explain how her comicality was precipitated. However, Mellencamp does elucidate the tension between comic performance and humorous pleasure that *Lucy* engenders.

Reading *Lucy* and *Gracie* through Freud's theory of the comic to explore Lucy's mastery of comic movement and Gracie's mastery of linguistic abuse Mellencamp studies the relationship between these characters and their respective husbands to demonstrate that both women disavow their husbands' assumed and real power. Gracie is a direct victim of

²⁵ 'Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy,' *Critiquing the Sitcom*, *ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ *I Love Lucy*, Oppenheimer et al., *ibid.* *The Burns and Allen Show*, created by George Burns and Gracie Allen, produced by Columbia Broadcasting System, later McCadden Productions (USA: CBS, 1950-1958).

patriarchal power in her relationship with George and Lucy, through the permissibility of racism, laughs at Ricky (a Cuban), making him the clown to her 'straight-man' despite the reverse often occurring. On the other hand, Gracie's husband, George Burns, is a patriarchal smooth-talking, wisecracking, white American husband, affording her no opportunity to laugh at him. Gracie simply ignores the patriarchal attitudes and positioning of her husband, to triumph over him using absurd logic and nonsensical language. Gorton notes that Freud saw the hysteric "as an effort to receive attention, to break from the confines of a patriarchal society, as a rebellion against the expectations placed on women, or as a revolt against the limitations imposed,"²⁷ giving weight to Mellencamp's readings of Lucy and Gracie as victims of the contemporary hegemonic discourse. The force of Mellencamp's paper is that these characters attempt to achieve in a world which seeks to "contain" them. Thus, for Mellencamp it was the containment policies of post-war America sent women back home, and which resulted in them being treated like, and subsequently behaving like, dependent children; without overtly stating it, is how she reads both female characters. In the clash between the desire of these characters (to be liberated) and the 'reality' in which they exist Mellencamp's reading offers how comic performance can be enabled; it is the character's ability to deny the reality of their victimization that makes them comic. As such Mellencamp offers a more complex way of viewing the audience's relation to 'the comic' than is available in Freud's study of the joke or comic. While Mellencamp sees both women as victims of the narrative, she notes that both are also responding to feelings of powerlessness in response to the hegemonic discourse of the "happy housewife" and accepted wisdom of "husband/father knows best." Mellencamp argues the policies not only restricted women's role in the social, such policies made them feel powerless or, more pertinently, disempowered them – power was taken from them. Feelings of powerlessness trigger motivation to alter the dynamic, yet disempowerment results in anxiety, a point I unpack in the next chapter. Further one could read Mellencamp's analysis through the question: does comic performance serve an ideological purpose of hiding the real (social) agenda or does it serve to obfuscate the real meaning of the program (in this case that women outside the domestic setting appear as buffoons)?

If I have a quibble with Mellencamp it is that while she insists that it is the characters' response to their containment that enables the comicality, she does not ask why the character becomes comic within that containment. As Lucy is blind to her lack of ability one can only assume that this character's want (to be successful in her chosen goal) is bound to her lack of awareness of the political realities impacting on her, and women in general. We can also wonder if her ego-ideal may be a narcissistic defense in response to a hegemonic discourse that seeks to control her, imposing an Ego-Ideal of which she is unaware. In Chapter Five we will see that it is the character's relationship with discursive frames such as this enable comic performance, and for now note that Mellencamp enables a reading of the characters as being 'contained' by a hegemonic discourse in a physical or metaphorical sense. To better understand the tension that Mellencamp sees arising between comic performance and humorous pleasure, she turns to Freud's work on humor.

²⁷ Gorton, *ibid.*, 51.

Freud surmised that when the ego and its pleasure principle encounters a reality and with which it does not want (or is unable) to engage, the ego is intimidated and feels powerless. At this point, the super-ego steps in to ‘reframe’ reality, and in so doing helps the ego disconnect from, and even laugh at, the situation; the super-ego offers some defense for the ego, enabling the experience of mastery and control over the external environment. Rather than enabling engagement with reality, the super-ego creates an illusion of reality for the ego, just as the parent does for the child when she/he is affected by some trauma. It is the super-ego which assists the ego in dealing with the traumata, by telling it from its own (higher) perspective that the world can be viewed as nothing but a game; reality can thus be repudiated. A ‘sense of humor’ enables “the rejection of the claims of reality ... [and] signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.”²⁸ For Freud, the goal to evade suffering places humor in a dignified position as opposed to jokes, which “serve simply to obtain a yield of pleasure or place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression.”²⁹ While the super-ego ‘protects’ the ego in such situations it can also be surmised that engagement with reality, and the requirement to process and adjust to that reality, has been denied. Lucy is a victim who denies the pain as well as the reality of the situation.

For Mellencamp the point of Lucy’s degradation, the spectator, is released from the pain of humility of the character, resulting in humorous pleasure. If the character had appropriately engaged the agency of the super-ego, they would avoid degradation and laugh at the situation, yet in most cases they do not, and if they do, their laughter is short-lived. The comic, governed by the pleasure principle, puts secondary processes to the service of their desires and as such their super-ego has not developed through an engagement with the reality principle; they have no, or at the least, a restricted functioning super-ego that must affect their engagement with ‘reality.’ Thus, secondary narcissism – here defined as the regression to the primary narcissistic state that involves an attachment to the pleasure principle – kicks in as a defense mechanism for the (unstable) ego that comes under stress, such as the loss of, or rejection by the love-object. This explains to some extent the character’s inability and even refusal to ‘change.’ It is useful now to look at post-Freudian analysis to better understand the comic character’s psychical construction and their relationship to the social.

1.3 – Post-Freud and the comic.

Lacan saw the first rough cast of the ego emerge, in what he terms, the mirror phase. This cast is the ‘small other,’ an idealized mirror-image of the ego and is “that point at which he desires to gratify himself in himself.”³⁰ The mirror stage is a further allegorization of the

²⁸ Freud, ‘Humour,’ 1927, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud no. XXI*, ed., James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 163.

²⁹ Ibid. Freud’s theory explains why and how we manage to separate ourselves from such humility, but as Mick Eaton notes it is difficult to compare the operation of the comic and humor as posited by Freud because each is based on different topographies of the psyche: the comic (born of the preconscious), the joke (born of the unconscious) and humor (being the result of the super-ego), ‘Laughter in the Dark,’ *Screen* (22.2, 1981b), 21-25.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (London and New York: Karnac books,

myth of Narcissus and, as mentioned, is the first of the three orders that structure the psyche. The Imaginary shapes the idealized ego, and the Symbolic operates in the social, laying the ground for the Ego-Ideal. The ego ideal (until now has been notated as ego-ideal) is formed through an identification with the small 'other' during the mirror stage and is projected by the subject into the future becoming the ego-ideal; "[t]he point of the ego ideal is that from which the subject will see himself, as one says ... *as others see him*."³¹ Evans clarifies the Lacanian view of Other: "The little other is the other who is not really other, but a reflection and projection of ego... [and] is thus entirely inscribed in the imaginary order." Evans continues: to write that "[t]he big Other designates radical alterity ... because it cannot be assimilated through identification... and hence the big Other is inscribed in the Symbolic."³² Thus the Ego-Ideal, formed in response to the 'Big Other,' is the agency whose gaze the subject tries to impress with their ego image and impelling the subject to achieve goals in the social as Symbolic.

Lacanian theory demonstrates that identity is achieved through the recognition by an 'other,' that has formed initially in the mirror stage and later in the Symbolic, as 'Other.' The Lacanian notion that initially the mother is the Other, and in the recognition of her lack (of a phallus for the male child), she becomes the other. Any disruption of this relationship to the Other therefore, is then replicated in the Symbolic. Thus, if the first identification for the ego occurs in the mirror stage, and this relationship is distorted, identity becomes shaped by, and dependent on, the discourse of the Other in the Symbolic is then determined by relationships in the social; it is a defensive response to the (unconscious and repressed) wounding, becoming a false self that maintains the repression. The wound and the Ego-Ideal then become entwined.

What Lacan gives us is a clearer differentiation between the ideal ego (self) and the ego-ideal (other), the Ego-Ideal (Other in the Symbolic) and their determinants in the development of the subject. In light of *Lucy*, the ideal ego/ego-ideal is a combination of projection and introjection sitting alongside the Ego-Ideal and its introjection from the Symbolic; further the ego-ideal as well as the Ego-Ideal could be formed on a misinterpretation or misrecognition of the 'Other.' While the ideal ego and ego ideal are being used interchangeably, by separating them according to projection of the subject's idealization (ideal ego) and a combination of projection and introjection (ego-ideal), assists in determining the nature of the psychic tension that may be operating in the comic character. If repression instantiates behavior and born of frustration in the primary narcissistic striving for satisfaction from the primary care-giver, then such tension can contribute to comic performance. As long as the dynamics remain repressed (or 'unknown'), those characters who seek to escape a situation are not only unable to, they become caught in a dynamic that is 'unknowable' (to them at least).

Having located the ideal ego along with the ego-ideal in the Imaginary and the Ego-Ideal in the Symbolic, Lacan places the super-ego in the psychic register of the Real. This separation enables greater clarity in determining identity formation as driven by desire and may assist in understanding that psychoanalytic desire is not centered just on lack, it can be

1973), 257.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 268.

³² Evans, *ibid.*, 132-133.

viewed as a simultaneous response to, and engagement with, the environment through both the Symbolic and the Real. For the purposes of this discussion I will use ego-ideal to incorporate the ideal ego formed in the Imaginary and Ego-Ideal as developing from an engagement with the Other and the Symbolic.

Moreover for Lacan, as Slavoj Žižek writes: “the superego, with its excessive guilt feelings, is merely the necessary obverse of the Ego-Ideal.”³³ The subject is further caught between innate ‘desires’ which are surrendered for the collective Ego-Ideal, or she/he is in conflict with the punitive demands of the super-ego as the Real, “[f]or Lacan, the seemingly benevolent agency of the Ego-Ideal that leads us to moral growth and maturity forces us to betray the ‘law of desire’ by adopting the ‘reasonable’ demands of the existing socio-symbolic order.”³⁴ And while I may not agree with Žižek that we are forced to betray the law of desire as this opens up the question as to what defines ‘desire’ and from whose point, I agree that desire and the demands of the socio-symbolic order are two sides of the same coin – that which enables or inspires the ego-ideal/Ego-Ideal and is seen as “good” and that which prevents wishes and desires from coming to fruition (the super-ego) and is seen as “bad” – ‘the Law-of-the-Father,’ in whose eyes I am guilty. It is through the oedipal identification with the father or his representatives simultaneously with the separation from the (m)other and fear of castration that the super-ego is formed: foreclosure in “the-Name-of-the-Father.” Here the complex is a symbolic imposition of the ego’s engagement with society and its rules – for Lacan through language – rather than the source of a personality disorder. However, this is the view of the subject of the ‘Other’ and does not take into account the view or more importantly the intention of the ‘Other,’ and which in time becomes the ‘other’ in the social.

Pauly may be aware of how the Other sees him and in response laughs tendentiously at its “laws,” while Lucy is completely unaware of how the Other sees her and in particular the other, Ricky. This is what I see as the root of Lucy’s anxiety – she does not ‘see’ the intentionality of the other that may echo the Symbolic with its demands to make women “happy housewives” – underscored by her other, Ricky. Lucy is blind to the intentionality of both the other and the Other that enabled women’s participation in the workforce during World War II and laying the ground of an Ego-Ideal – only to be sent back home once the men returned. This character’s ideal ego is at odds with both *her* ego-ideal (maintained in her relationship with Ricky as ‘other’) and the Ego-Ideal of the Symbolic (the hegemonic discourse) as well as the super-ego of the Real (articulated by Ricky). In the attempt to enter the Symbolic (or re-enter the social) the comic character remains attached to an ideal ego or magnification of themselves that is at odds with either an other or an Other and *its* Ego-Ideal. The view of the subject is a feeling of subjugation rather than seeing the intentionality of the other and how that impacts on their own feelings and restrictions. However, it is in the disavowal and denial of certain realities that generates psychical tension; the character is forced to act to alleviate such tension. If characters are aware of the Real beyond the Symbolic and its intention they simply deny it or in Pauly’s case defy it.

Pauly manages to score a date with a long-legged blonde who finds his car “cute,” takes her to the drive-in, and from whom he seeks sexual gratification.³⁵ The object as prop is

³³ *How to Read Lacan* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Small and Large Pizza,” Fenech, *Pizza*, *ibid.*

a source of power. When the date asks to have the roof of the car closed Pauly is unable to reach the switch due to the size of the car; when she asks to be taken home we hear the voice of the judge boom down: “Sucked in to you Mr. Falzoni.” Pauly is not only undone by the object, he is laughed at by the law that he sought to defy. This character may be aware that the Law of the Symbolic attempts to thwart his desires, it is the tension between his conscious desire (to have sex) and preconscious need for power (through the car) that begets his comicality. If he knows or accepts the authority of the law Paul would become, like Antigone in her determination to bury her brother in defiance of the ‘law,’ a tragic figure; I discuss her possible complex in the next chapter.

Without being reductionist, I prefer to use the notation of ‘ideal ego’ for the idealization by the subject in the Imaginary, with the ‘ego-ideal’ being formed out of a desire and want to achieve in the social and through the relationship with the ‘other’; ‘Ego-Ideals’ are formed in the engagement with the Symbolic and its hegemonic discourse and may incur a denial of the desire (but not the want). Either the ideal ego or the ego-ideal may be at odds with the Ego-Ideal of the Symbolic and when introjected either consciously or unconsciously, as in Lucy’s case, results in a struggle to satisfy both demands that result in erratic and extreme behavior. Such incongruity enables the comicality of how the character views themselves in relation to the Symbolic rather than, as we see in drama, the conflict between characters who battle for power and control, where the source of power is more evident. The more blind or unconscious the character is to the incongruity between how they see themselves and how the world sees them, the greater the potential for repeating the same action (and never working through) in the drive to ‘master’ the situation; the attachment to the object rather than the attempt to change the other (as much as some characters attempt to do so, especially in drama) is the root of the comic tension.

If as I surmise that comic tension is enabled by the conflict between the character’s ego ideal and that of the collective Ego-Ideal and the Lacanian Real, then the alienated or ‘divided’ subject could be viewed as having an Imaginary at odds with either the Symbolic or Real. The comic then would emerge in the Imaginary and in opposition to the Symbolic or Real. However, while the comic may be trapped in the Imaginary it is the split between the Symbolic and Real that maintains their sense of powerlessness in relation to the discourse that they seek to master. Looking at the flip side and tragedy, Lacan’s reading of Antigone demonstrates how a character persists in fulfilling a desire and goal to bury her Polynices despite the advice of her brother and consequences of the law of King Creon. The tragedy comes from knowing her actions will have devastating consequences for her – and they do. The comic character is not only ‘unconscious’ or at the least in denial of the consequences of their actions, they are unaware of how the other sees them. If they do, as Pauly does, they ‘take it up’ to them. The comic character in pursuing their desire is unaware of the intentions of the other; their struggle can be seen as the clash between *their* ideal ego, alongside the ego-ideal that has been formed out of desire for the love-object and the Ego-Ideal of the Symbolic (and which may seek to impose its own agenda). Representing this as an equation:

$$I/me = \text{ideal ego } (p) + \text{ego-ideal } (p+i) + \text{Ego-Ideal } (S + i)$$

“I” is identity of the individual and p is projection of self and also to secure love, “i” is introjection from the ‘other’ and “S” is the Symbolic and introjection of the ‘Other.’ When S and i are at odds with p, the subject’s ideal self and ‘self’ begets tension, creating anxiety in

the Lacanian Real. Thus, for tension to be inscribed, p, I and S are incongruous in at least two registers. I unpack the nuance between each of these states in the next chapter. Here I am focused on a more simplistic notion of the comic, trapped in the Imaginary and at odds with an Other, as either Symbolic or Real, turning on the consciousness of the character; trapped in the Lacanian Imaginary and, unable to engage with either the Symbolic or the Real, the comic character at odds with both registers. Their comicality results from the psychical tension generated when their ego-ideal is thwarted or under threat by either the collective Ego-Ideal or the Real or both; they are trapped in the gaze of the other and/or Other.

1.4 – The character trapped in the gaze.

Lacan's theory of the gaze is derived from the desire of the subject: only through desire does the subject see the object; it is the objectification of the subject in the gaze that is the cause of the alienation. Lacan's fourth law, the 'law of desire' further assists in depicting the subject's struggle born of a tension between an ego-ideal/Ego-Ideal that may not even be conscious. Hence desire is both the object and the cause. Thus, in *their* desire to be loved by the love-object, the character, now seen as an object, becomes trapped in the gaze of an other/Other. However, Lacan does not deal with the *desire* of the 'other'/'Other.'

Basil Fawlty, the snobbish hotel manager in *Fawlty Towers*, strives to be accepted by the British Establishment with all his pretension, class conscious behavior and sense of superiority. This character derives much of his identity from the delusion that he is a competent and successful manager of an upper-class establishment. In the episode titled "The Germans" Sybil, Basil's self-absorbed and controlling wife, is in hospital for an operation on an ingrown toenail.³⁶ This gives Basil great delight, not only at the pain Sybil will endure, but that he is at last given free reign of the hotel; in doing so he will fulfill his Ego-Ideal and Sybil, the source of his ego-ideal, will have to recognize his efforts. Despite the competitive and vindictive nature of their relationship, and seeming disinterest in each other, Basil is like a child desperate for the love and approval of his manipulative and narcissistic mother; she never delivers to him the recognition he craves. In this episode, each time Basil attempts to complete a task he is interrupted, often by Sybil calling to remind him of what he needs to do. We do not know if Sybil seeks to deliberately prevent Basil from achieving his goals or why, but she maintains control of him by keeping him in a state of confusion through constant and changing demands. Although Basil is further undone by his own limitations, it can be said that Sybil instantiates chaos as a means of securing power over Basil, causing him to be flung between the psychical poles of grandiosity and worthlessness. When his fragile sense of self comes under pressure Basil attempts to control the environment around him and in the ensuing farcical mayhem, takes out his frustration on his hapless, non-English speaking servant, Manuel. Basil exists at a level of conscious/unconscious tension that is precariously maintained and easily thrown off balance by Sybil or disruptive elements. I liken the character of Sybil to the Lacanian Real or voice of the superego assuming the "Supreme Being-in-Evil" imposing "a senseless, destructive, purely oppressive, almost always anti-

³⁶ "The Germans," written by John Cleese & Connie Booth, series 1, episode 6, *Fawlty Towers*, *ibid.*, first transmitted October 24, 1975.

legal morality' on the neurotic subject."³⁷ Here Evans hints at the intentionality of the Other.

In the episode of *Kath & Kim* mentioned earlier, Kim is flicking through the school annual decrying her fellow school mates and life choices ("mole," "virgin," "loser") as a means of justifying her decision not to go to a school reunion. Later when Kim discovers that she will be home alone on the night in question, she attempts to nullify the horrific possibility that she is a loser and decides to attend the school reunion, declaring: "This time I am going to wipe the floor with what I'm wearing." Dressed and ready to go, Kim appears in the doorway of Kath's bedroom, obviously seeking approval. Kim has twisties in her hair, wearing knickerbockers (cut off pants) and the puffy-sleeved blouse mentioned earlier:

Kim: Ta da! I look like one classy peasant.

Kath: Oh well. (pause) Yes. That looks nice, love.

Kim: I think I look like Rachel Hunter.

Kath: You look like some sort of hunter.

(Trying hard not to grimace) Where did you get those pants?

Kim: They're Collette Dinnigan knickerbockers.

Kath: (feigning) They're kweel [cool].

Kath's comments are not only less than generous, it is apparent she competes with Kim in trying to be hip. As Kim turns away, she walks into a fishing rod that Kel (Kath's husband) is lowering down from the attic, setting up the pratfall that is to come. However, as Kim seeks the approval of the other, Kath, this character while narcissistic in her goal also seeks to be 'seen' by the Other now other.

Basil and Kim enable a reading of the sitcom comic character caught in the double bind of desire – the need to attain an ideal ego and the need to have the love (or at least recognition) of the love-object and the goal to be successful (or at least masters of their 'world'). What they are unaware of is that these goals are unattainable because the love-object either cannot, or will not, grant their primary desire. Furthermore, these characters are unaware of the psychical tension that is engendered through the nature of their relationship with the love-object. The need to maintain a psychical balance is what Freud sees as central to the pleasure principle – the absence of tension. In the sitcom then the 'situation' both maintains a precarious psychical equilibrium as well as force the character to attack or dispel any disruption that threatens their sense of self or the "stability" of their psychical structure and its familiarity, raising the question: what is the nature of the tension that the comic character experiences as "normal" and which they seek to maintain at all costs? However, whilst seemingly narcissistic, Basil and Kim are not only unaware of their limitations and capacities, they are, and more pertinently, blind to the nature of their relationships.

Now I ask what differentiates these comic characters from each other, and, in particular, from characters such as Sybil and Kath, who are comic in nature yet appear to have no issue with an other/Other? It is useful to return to the myth of Narcissus to understand narcissistic behavior as it relates to Echo and the interpersonal relationships between characters shaped by such psychical experiences.

³⁷ Evans, *ibid.*, 201.

1.5 – *Narcissus and Echo as comic characters.*

Narcissus' mother, the nymph Liriope, has been trapped by the river god Cephissus to whom she bears a child, the beautiful Narcissus. Some readings of the myth offer that Liriope has been raped by Cephissus as she is abandoned after the encounter. Victoria Coulson argues that it is the rape that affects Narcissus' subjectivity as "... Liriope [in her trauma] has never been able to meet her son with a receptive and creative look." Trapped in the reflection as a form of escape from the devouring or non-mirroring gaze, Narcissus is unable to love another who is not his mirror-image (for Coulson he seeks the mirroring he never received). Coulson continues, that in his failure to "see" himself as others "see" him, "Liriope's beautiful child enacts her revenge on the visual appetite that motivated her own rape."³⁸ Echo, the disembodied nymph comes across the now adolescent Narcissus projects *her* idealization onto him, in turn reinforcing his self-love by way of 'echoing.' Echo has suffered a verbal lashing by her mother, Hera, when she discovers her daughter has been protecting her adulterous father, Zeus, forcing her to flee to the grotto that neighbors Narcissus' mirrored pond with nothing other than an echoing voice. Both Narcissus and Echo have suffered from a psychic disturbance resulting in arrested emotional states: he trapped in his mirror-image, she as a disembodied voice. The psychical construction of both Narcissus and Echo is determined by their relationships with primary caregivers. Recognizing that narcissism is central to ego maturation and identity formation, it is logical to deduce that Echo's psychic construction would also be a harbinger of identity formation. Echo's treatment by her mother and the loyalty she has for her father may precipitate conflicting desires and fears. Just as has been theorized with the narcissist who suffers from a complex array of conflicts, Echo would similarly suffer from a combination of need for protection, fear of loss of love and desire to be seen by the other/Other triggering some degree of (blind) loyalty.

Returning to *Kath & Kim*, Sharon, defined as Kim's "second best friend," is a good example of an 'echo' comic character. In the episode we have been discussing, the main storyline centers on Kim and Sharon's school reunion. Sharon is desperate to go and wants Kim to go with her. The episode begins with Kim's husband, Brett, on the phone to her while he attempts to serve customers for the "computer city super sell-out sale." He has to work all weekend: "It's crazy here Kim." Cut to a mid-shot of Kim, prostrate on the couch, Cleopatra-like: "Well I'm flat chat here too; I'm pregnant you know, I can't do much anymore." The shot moves into a close-up as Kim hangs up the phone and hollers for Sharon. The camera pans to the kitchen where Sharon turns from the sink and comes rushing to the doorway, concern in her voice, "Yes Kim?" The camera pans back to Kim, "Can you pass the tiny teddies" (small chocolate biscuits); cut to Sharon still in the doorway, "They are right there Kim," as she points to the table next to Kim on which sit the jar of biscuits. Cut back to Kim, "I'm not supposed to do any heavy lifting." Sharon shuffles towards Kim, "Is that what the doctor said?" Kim holds up her hand with fingers spread, "No the nail tech."

This opening scene establishes that Kim is bored and suffering from Brett's lack of attention needs someone to be at her beck and call, with Sharon being the only one available.

³⁸ Victoria Coulson, 'The baby and the mirror: the sexual politics of the Narcissus myth in poststructuralist theory, Winnicottian psychoanalysis, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* III,' *Textual Practice* (2013, 27:5), 818.

After handing the bucket of tiny teddies to Kim, Sharon straightens up, heading back to the kitchen in an act of self-protection as the camera follows her. Sharon continues, “I don’t want to go to the school reunion on my own.” Once back in the safety of the kitchen, she continues like a child pleading to go to the circus, “It will be fuuuuun,” to which Kim replies, “Oh yeah like last time when I was completely ‘umiliated [humiliated] turning up in fancy dress.” Dramaturgically, one character’s want is the other’s source of power. The scene ends with Kim managing to get Sharon to rearrange her work hours so that she can pick up Kim’s dry-cleaning and take her to Kath’s, all the while holding up a carrot about the reunion, “I said I’d think about it.” Like an omnipotent narcissist, Kim wields power over Sharon who in turn seeks to be defined through her association with Kim; while each may have different motivations, both have the same goal: not seen or defined as having no friends.

Sharon gets to go to the reunion after a long-lost sports buddy, Lisa Marie, seeking to repay Sharon’s kindness at school, asks Sharon to accompany her. This leaves Kim “home alone” on a Saturday night. Motivated by the fear of looking like a loser herself, Kim’s goal becomes a decision to “wipe the floor.” Arriving at the reunion in the outfit she paraded in front of Kath and now wearing an eye-patch to cover her bruised eye resulting from the poke by Kel’s fishing rod, along with her heels causing her to hobble across the grassy verge, Kim looks very much like a drunken pirate. Hence this character’s fear is manifested in the outfit, rather than her desire being thwarted as we saw with Pauly. Later in the episode, Kim discovers that Sharon’s friend has offered the apple-shaped and overweight Sharon the opportunity to fulfill her dream of being an elite athlete. In true narcissistic fashion Kim retaliates with abuse and vitriol, forcing Sharon to choose her dream over her friendship with Kim. Sharon does leave, but, as we expect, and as the form demands, she returns.

Suddenly the sliding door to the patio opens and Sharon stands there. The air is tense, wafting with the smell of recently cooked food, and pregnant with the hope that Sharon has returned. Kath bustles herself and Brett off to leave Kim and Sharon alone like long-lost lovers. Kim offers Sharon a footy frank. Sharon pauses to digest the generous and unusual gesture by Kim; she rushes toward the bowl grabbing one like a dog being given a bone. The camera holds them in a two-shot. It’s a delicate situation for Kim and we want her to handle it carefully:

Kim: What are you doing here?
Sharon (eating hungrily): I’ve left Lisa.
Kim: What happened?

The mid-shot sways gently like a boat on the harbor.

Sharon: I just couldn’t handle it.
Kim: Why?
Sharon: Quite frankly I didn’t care for the way she spoke to me.
Kim: Like what, what did she say?
Sharon: Oh, you know, she was always on and on at me about how talented I am, and how my friends don’t appreciate me.

Close-up on Kim who is beginning to feel the weather change:

Kim: That does sound weird.
Sharon: So, I hightailed it out of there and came straight back here.

There is a pause as Sharon looks up at Kim with doleful eyes:

Sharon (cont.): I missed you Kim.

Cut to a close-up of Kim as she digests the confession, and more significantly her win. Kim pauses as Sharon begins to take another footy frank. Suddenly Sharon stops, looking like a naughty child caught with her hand in the sweets jar. The storm breaks:

Kim: Put that back, I said one. I've got morning sickness.

Sharon: Well I didn't know.

Kim: You never bloody do.

Kim launches into the familiar tirade of name-calling as both revert to hurling nonsensical sibling abuse at each other. Kath finally steps in:

Kath: Time out. Time out please. Now Kimmie look at moiye please.

Look at moiye. Now Sharon look at moiye. Now Kim look at Sharon.

Sharon look at Kim. Now both look at moiye please. Now I've got one word to say to both of you: reconciliation.³⁹

This episode is thematically guided by the question what happens when the 'echo' decides to leave. Sharon does not seek to change the dynamic and feeling weird at the treatment accorded to her by Lisa Marie rejects the opportunity to achieve her dream. The question for some might be why someone would return to such an abusive situation. Sadly, Sharon not only denies the abuse of Kim, she identifies with it; like a battered wife, she mistakes it for attention. Sharon is offered an opportunity to fulfill her dream, achieve *her* ego-ideal that will be her Ego-Ideal, yet is unable to because of her comfort in being treated like a slave-servant. If narcissism is the process of identity construction set up as a defense to an ego suffering from distorted object-relations, the question then becomes why doesn't Sharon develop a similar form of defense? Is the denial a defense of a narcissistic ego or, as we see with Sharon, a means of survival and 'status' as second-best friend. This character's denial of the reality is a form of ego defense. Sharon's comicality comes from the gap between how she sees herself, and how others see and use her; she is a sad character, resulting from a conscious fear of having no friends and an unconscious longing to be accepted for who she is (or wants to be), and too afraid to expect it.

We have seen that while narcissistic comic characters derive their power through objects and relationships, 'echoistic' comic characters may seek simply to be recognized by an other and as such become trapped in the 'gaze' of the other. As Echo does to Narcissus, Sharon has surrendered her narcissism to Kim. So, while Narcissus suffers from narcissism, Echo may therefore suffer from "echoism," itself an arrestment (or abdication) of one's own narcissism (or 'healthy' sense of self) in response to experiences that have disempowered the emergent ego. We can surmise that traits of echoism could include a fear of abandonment and rejection, a lack of voice and wavering self-esteem bolstered by loyalty and empathy towards those that need 'rescuing' – or they think they do.

The Greek myth of Narcissus, its Roman translation and psychoanalytic interpretation enable a reading of the comic character that defines them as either narcissistic or echoistic. And while Sharon is a good example of such characters, they need not be 'victims.' I explore these characters in Chapter Three, and now look more closely at those characters who repeatedly attempt to leave disempowering situation yet fail.

³⁹"The Moon," Riley & Turner, *Kath & Kim*, *ibid.* At the time the Australian Government was deliberating whether to give an apology to the Aboriginal people for the hurt suffered by the "stolen generation" as part of reconciliation with the dominant predominantly white Anglo population. "Moiye" is a phonetic transcription of the Australian dialectic pronunciation of "me."

1.6 – *The key character as master of their world?*

Psychoanalytic theory helps locate and define at least one character as the Lacanian ‘divided’ subject; they are not just the character full of hubris, nor a caricature, stereotype or an archetype, they are alienated selves striving for an identity in the social. As such their ideal ego comes into conflict with an ego-ideal formed in the reflection of the Other and in its lack beyond into the Real and which they attempt to restore, trapping them in the ‘gaze’ of the Other, being the other or the Symbolic. While the comic character may be unconscious, arrested in some degree of pre-oedipal maturation, it is the projection, at odds with either the Symbolic or the Real that is the harbinger of these characters’ downfall. However, for some characters it is not only about being ‘stuck’ in a pre or oedipal phase, it is about the impulse to ‘escape’ or change and which they never succeed. These characters believe or want to believe they are “masters of their domain.” I label these characters the *key character*, their dual psychic construction precipitates a perpetual struggle from object to subject, in much the same way Iain MacRury observes with the stand-up comic.⁴⁰ It is this struggle that is central to understanding the key character’s entrapment: *a type of comic (non) hero who never changes yet repeatedly struggles to escape the (unknown) entrapment* in order to achieve or maintain an ego-ideal/Ego-Ideal that is at odds with either the Symbolic (and its demands) or their capacity or both.

Lucy, Basil and Kimmie, whilst attempting to be masters of their world are ultimately “exposed.” These characters, primarily narcissistic in nature and displaying tell-tale traits such as delusion, greed, competitiveness, tendentiousness, denial, devaluation, vanity and entitlement are repeatedly thwarted in their attempts to succeed in the Symbolic. All three are comic victims whose denial of reality trap them in the gaze of an other/Other which they either attempt to live up to, deny, attack or shrink from, and from which they never escape. This chapter has examined the comic character’s degree of narcissistic hubris to find that some are motivated by unconscious conflicts and which enable their degradation. As these characters have psychical determinants emanating from either the gaze or its lack, in their enmeshment and urge to escape (the unknown) they become trapped in a struggle. As such in their attempts to be *both masters of their world and be seen by the other or Other*, I deduce these characters harbor psychical determinants of both Narcissus and Echo.

The key character is often the victim of the degradation, such as George in *Seinfeld*, whereas a central character, such as Jerry, can be at odds with the world around them yet may not be the victim of their hubris.⁴¹ Just as the comic character suffers from a temporary (objective) setback which they overcome in a humorous manner, the key character suffers humiliation (they are exposed). It is the nature of the humiliation that we need to understand as well as the entrapment, and which the echo character gives us some insight. However, unlike the key character the ‘echo’ comic character does not seek escape – rather they work at surviving in the dynamic and which disempowers them. Furthermore, as we have seen, some comic characters are ‘echoistic’ in that they seek to be seen by an other and through which

⁴⁰ Iain MacRury, ‘Humour as ‘social dreaming’: Stand-up comedy as therapeutic performance,’ *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (17.2, 2012), 185-203.

⁴¹ *Seinfeld*, created by Jerry Seinfeld & Larry David, produced by West-Shapiro Productions et al. (USA: NBC, 1989-1998).

they may have an identity. The arrested oedipal comic character is driven by either a need for power over an other/ Other (the narcissist), or by a need *for power* through an *identification* with the other (the echoist). Some characters such as Raymond from *Everybody Loves Raymond*⁴² may be considered a key character yet in analyzing this program, as I do in Chapter Four, we will see that it is Debra, his wife who is the key character as she struggles to be ‘seen’ and which ensures her entrapment in the gaze, whereas a central character often drives the narrative and so to incorporate both aspects in the central character is what we seek to achieve.

I now offer that the key character harbors the psychical aspects of narcissus and echo, aspects that are either conscious or unconscious, yet attempt to stay safe in a world and which threatens a view of the world that serves their narcissistic ideal. It is the psychical dualism which not only enables the comicality of such characters and their entrapment – they repeatedly attempt to escape the gaze yet fail. They are trapped in the Lacanian gaze and which they attempt to escape alongside an ego-ideal at odds with some other, of which they are unaware. In their refusal to engage with the reality of the ‘situation,’ the key character ensures both the re-situation and repeatability; as such they are the comic engine of a series. Hence in locating and defining the key character we need to know who struggles to maintain/gain an Ego-Ideal and is unable to. Chapter Two explores why that might be.

⁴² *Everybody Loves Raymond*, created by Philip Rosenthal, produced by Where’s Lunch et al. (USA: CBS, 1996-2005).