

DEFENSE MECHANISM IN *A MAN CALLED OTTO*: PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This study analyzes the use of defense mechanisms by Otto Anderson, the main character in the film A Man Called Otto (2022), following the loss of his wife and his struggle to cope with grief and isolation. The focus is on how Otto's behaviors reflect unconscious strategies used to manage emotional pain. The research applies Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms, which identifies unconscious processes that protect individuals from psychological distress. These include denial, repression and the gradual emergence of emotional awareness known as realization. The study uses a Psychological Approach, with data collected through scene observation, dialogue analysis, and film script review. Key scenes were identified and categorized according to Anna Freud's defense mechanism classifications. The findings reveal that Otto frequently uses denial and repression to avoid discussing or confronting his grief. He rejects help, isolates himself, and avoids emotional topics related to his late wife. Over time, through his connection with a new neighbor, he gradually begins to express care and rebuilds his relationship with life. This shift

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illustrates that while defense mechanisms initially shield Otto from emotional breakdown, they also prevent him from healing. It is through persistent human connection that Otto slowly moves toward acceptance. The film demonstrates that ego defenses can delay grief processing, but empathy and social support are essential for emotional recovery.

Keywords: Defense Mechanisms, Denial, Repression.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, the problems of the study, the purposes of the study, the significances of the study, the scope and limitation, the definition of the key terms, and the organization of the study.

Generally, literature includes novels, short stories, poems, and plays. Literature is often seen as a reflection of social life. It is not only shaped by the world around it but also has the power to influence it. Because of this, literature is an important way for writers to express their ideas, experiences, and thoughts about life. Through imagination, literature can give deeper meanings and critiques of human life. As it developed, literature was no longer limited to written works; it also began to appear in visual forms like films. Films, as a modern form of literature, can show conflict, emotions, and character changes in a more real and complex way (Boggs & Petrie, 2008).

According to Amelia, Setyowati, and Astutik (2024), the analysis of a main character's hierarchy of needs can reveal how personal motivations and struggles shape character development in a narrative. One film that is interesting to study from a psychological perspective is *A Man Called Otto* (2022). It tells the story of *Otto* Anderson, a man who experiences significant changes after the death of his wife Sonya. This loss causes deep emotional pain and makes *Otto* a quiet, angry, and distant person. He avoids people and chooses to live alone. Behind his cold and harsh attitude, *Otto* hides sadness and loneliness. Without realizing it, he builds mental defenses to protect himself from pain.

In psychology, this kind of protection is called ego defense mechanisms. Sigmund Freud first introduced this concept, and his daughter Anna Freud further explained it in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1966). According to Anna Freud, when someone experiences emotional stress, the ego automatically employs defense mechanisms to protect the mind. These include denial (refusing to accept painful facts), repression (pushing sad memories or feelings into the unconscious), and several others. *Otto* shows these defenses in the film. He denies his sadness, refuses help from others, avoids memories of his wife, and focuses on strict daily routines. These defenses, however, do not heal his pain they only delay his recovery.

Things begin to change when a new family moves across the street: Marisol, a cheerful pregnant woman, her husband Tommy, and their two daughters. At first, *Otto* is annoyed by their presence, but over time, their kindness and interactions start to soften him. He slowly begins to help them, builds a connection, and faces his emotions. He starts to remember his love for Sonya and finds new meaning in life.

The film shows that care, friendship, and human connection can help someone heal from loss and rediscover happiness.

In *A Man Called Otto*, *Otto* is portrayed as a disciplined and loyal man with strong personal values. His emotional distance is a way to protect himself from further pain. His reaction to change especially when meeting a lively new family becomes the focus of this study. To analyze how *Otto* uses defense mechanisms to cope with grief and loneliness, this research applies Anna Freud's psychoanalytic theory. This approach helps to understand how *Otto* protects himself emotionally and how he eventually begins to heal.

This film was chosen as the subject of research for several reasons. First, it provides a deep and realistic picture of how grief and loneliness affect the human mind. Nurlaila, Setyowati, and Duwila (2024) argue that signs and their connotative meanings in film or drama scenes can convey deeper messages that support character and story development. *Otto's* struggle is complex and meaningful, making him a strong subject for psychoanalytic study.

Second, the film clearly illustrates *Otto's* use of defense mechanisms in response to trauma. His behavior from frequent anger to social isolation offers rich material to analyze using psychological theory. Third, *Otto's* journey from hopeless isolation to emotional reconnection provides an example of resilience and the importance of human relationships. His transformation deepens our understanding of how defense mechanisms operate and how emotional healing can occur.

While previous studies on films have explored psychological perspectives such as trauma, identity, and human needs, there is still a limited focus on analyzing ego defense mechanisms in the context of grief and healing in contemporary cinema. This gap highlights the significance of the present study, which seeks to explore how defense mechanisms manifest in *A Man Called Otto* and how they contribute to character development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, explains that human behavior is strongly influenced by the unconscious mind. Freud (1961) divided personality into three parts: the id, which contains instincts and desires; the superego, which represents moral values and social norms; and the ego, which balances the demands of the id and the rules of the superego by considering reality. When these parts conflict, the ego feels tension or anxiety. To manage this, the ego uses defense mechanisms unconscious strategies that protect individuals from emotional pain. Building on her father's ideas, Anna Freud (1966) expanded the concept of ego defense mechanisms in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. She described them as automatic, unconscious strategies used by the ego to reduce anxiety and protect the mind from painful emotions. Among many types, she identified denial, repression, sublimation, projection, and regression. In this study, the focus is on denial and repression, as these are most relevant to the character Otto Anderson in *A Man Called Otto* (2022).

Denial occurs when a person refuses to accept a painful reality. Otto shows denial by avoiding social contact and pretending to be fine after his wife's death, even though he feels lonely. Anna Freud categorized denial into three forms: simple denial (rejecting the truth), minimization (accepting but downplaying it), and fantasy denial (escaping into imagination). Meanwhile, repression happens when a person unconsciously pushes away painful memories or feelings. Otto represses his sadness by focusing on routines and refusing to talk about his wife. Anna Freud divided repression into primary repression (blocking unwanted thoughts before they reach awareness) and after-expulsion repression (pushing previously conscious memories back into the unconscious).

Both Freud and Anna Freud emphasized that these defense mechanisms help individuals cope with inner conflict and emotional pain. Therefore, understanding these mechanisms is essential to analyze Otto's psychological condition and behavior in *A Man Called Otto*.

3. METHODS

Research Design This study uses a psychological approach to analyze the elements found in the film *A Man Called Otto*, with the main theory taken from Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms. According to Anna Freud (1966), defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies used by individuals to protect themselves from anxiety or internal conflict. This theory helps the researcher understand Otto's behavior in the film through scenes, dialogues, and character interactions. The study uses content analysis and thematic analysis to find psychological patterns related to grief, repression, denial.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that *Otto* employs Denial and Repression as primary defense mechanisms

Denial:

Denial is a defense mechanism characterized by the refusal to acknowledge or confront painful, threatening, or uncomfortable realities or facts. Otto consistently demonstrates denial, particularly concerning the profound impact of Sonya's death and his subsequent isolation.

○ **Simple Denial:**

In the first sub denial this simple denial means someone refuses to accept a painful truth or reality without realizing it (Anna Freud, 1966).



(2022, 00:15:30 – 00:17:00)

Marisol: “Do you need help carrying those?”

Otto: “No. I don’t need help. I’m fine.”

In this scene Otto refuses help from Marisol, insisting he is fine despite clear struggles.

○ **Minimization:**

Minimization is when someone accepts a painful event but acts like it wasn’t a big deal or didn’t affect them much (Anna Freud, 1966).



(2022, 00:25:45 – 00:26:15)

Marisol: “I heard about your wife.... I’m sorry.”

Otto: “It was a long time ago. Life goes on.”

“In this scene, Otto’s new neighbor Marisol tries to start a personal conversation. She shows sympathy about the death of Otto’s wife. Otto responds in a flat, unemotional way and quickly changes the subject.”

○ **Fantasy Denial:**

Fantasy Denial is a defense mechanism where someone avoids painful reality by escaping into an imaginary world or unrealistic situations.



(2022, 00:48:15 – 00:50:30)

Otto looks at the train tracks, then closes his eyes. When he opens them, he sees Sonya sitting next to him even though it’s only in his mind.

Sonya (in his imagination): You're not alone, Otto. Not really.

Otto: It's so hard without you.

Sonya (smiling gently): You still have so much left to do. Let them in.

Otto: I don't know how...

Sonya: You'll figure it out. I'll be with you. Always.

Otto opens his eyes. Sonya is gone. He sits alone, his eyes full of tears.

In this situation Otto imagines comforting moments with Sonya, escaping painful reality.

- **Repression:**

Repression is a defense mechanism in which an individual unconsciously pushes painful or threatening thoughts, memories, or feelings out of conscious awareness.

- **Primary Repression:**

which prevents disturbing desires from ever reaching consciousness, *Otto* channels his grief into anger over trivial issues like parking rules.



(2022, 00:10:05 – 00:11:30)

Otto: You can't just park like that! This isn't a zoo.

Neighbor: Sorry, I didn't think it'd be a big deal.

Otto: Well, it is! Follow the rules!

- **After-expulsion Repression:**

Where previously conscious thoughts or memories are pushed back into the unconscious. He avoids conversations about Sonya and hides painful memories.



(2022, 01:00:10 – 01:02:30)

Marisol (empathetic): “Otto, I know how much you love your wife. Can you tell me more about her?”

Otto (immediately evasive): “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Marisol: “But maybe it could help”

Otto (firmly): “I said no! That’s enough.”

These defenses initially shield *Otto* from emotional collapse but prolong his suffering. The turning point comes through his bond with Marisol and her family. Their warmth enables *Otto* to open up, face his grief, and rediscover meaning in life. The study supports Anna Freud’s view that while defenses protect the ego, healing requires conscious acceptance and social support.

5. CONCLUSION

This study discusses the ego defense mechanisms used by Otto Anderson, the main character in the film *A Man Called Otto* (2022), based on Anna Freud’s theory. The analysis shows that *Otto* mainly uses two types of defense mechanisms denial and repression. To begin with, denial appears when *Otto* refuses to admit his emotional loneliness, rejects help from people around him, and keeps following strict routines even after major changes in his life. This behavior shows how he tries to act strong while hiding his true feelings. On the other hand, repression is shown through his efforts to avoid talking about his late wife, Sonya, and his habit of keeping himself busy to push away painful memories.

These behaviors clearly reflect *Otto*’s emotional struggle in dealing with the deep grief and trauma caused by losing his wife. At first, denial and repression help him survive emotionally by protecting him from sadness and anxiety. However, as time goes on, these same mechanisms make him feel isolated and emotionally stuck. The situation begins to change when *Otto* slowly learns to accept his feelings and allows himself to reconnect with others, especially with Marisol and her family.

Overall, this study emphasizes that ego defense mechanisms may help reduce emotional pain temporarily, but real healing happens only when a person learns to accept reality, open up emotionally, and build supportive relationships. Therefore, *Otto*’s journey highlights the importance of human connection and emotional acceptance in overcoming grief and restoring psychological balance.

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