

EGO DEFENSE MECHANISM OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the main character's defense mechanisms when experiencing conflict in Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*. This research uses descriptive analysis method with a literary psychology approach that focuses on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory regarding defense mechanism. The research technique is library research. The research findings reveal that the main character performs defense mechanisms such as rationalization, sublimation, denial, identification, and repression when he encounters unwanted feelings.

Keywords: main character; defense mechanism; psychoanalysis; literary psychology; anxiety.

I. BACKGROUND

In Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the human mind is constructed of three distinct elements: id, superego, and ego, pushed by urges in the unconscious. Id is the most basic system that is the source of bodily needs, wants, desires, impulses, and drives, and it operates according to the pleasure principle that seeks immediate gratification (Schacter, Gilbert, Nock, & Wegner, 2020). On the other hand, superego occupies internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire from parents and society, and is our sense of right and wrong (Cherry, 2020). It is a psychic regulation system for self-evaluation that comprises the capacity for empathy and moral reasoning, and self-conscious emotions like shame, pride, and guilt (Schalkwijk, 2018). Meanwhile ego is developed through contact with the external world that enables us to deal with life's practical demands and mediates between the id and the superego (Schacter, Gilbert, Nock, & Wegner, 2020).

An imbalance between id, superego, and ego creates anxiety, which can take form in reality anxiety, neurotic anxiety, and moral anxiety (Corey, 2013). Still referring to the same source, it is also mentioned that reality anxiety is the fear of real danger and threat from the external world. Neurotic anxiety is a form of anxiety that

is excessive, irrational, and stems from internal insecurities, rather than external threats, and is triggered by the feeling of losing control over themselves, their lives, or when their ego is threatened. There is fear that these impulses will lead to punishment (Shafir, 2021; Cherry, 2021). Moral anxiety is when someone is anxious to violate their own moral principles (Cherry, 2021).

When someone encounters a traumatic or unpleasant experience, ego will defend itself by distorting reality in the means to prevent anxiety. This is called a defense mechanism, which is a mental process that is done unconsciously to protect the mind and avoid stress. It offers a sense of ease and a way out to escape reality. The strategy used is denying, manipulating, and deflecting the truth of reality to shield someone from heavy and unwanted feelings. Defense mechanism comes in the form of denial, repression, rationalization, sublimation, and identification.

Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* tells a story about a lonely seven-year old boy who spends the majority of the book in internal anguish and tries his best to fight his inner demons. He has to deal with death, violence, and a monster disguised as an innocent housekeeper. She taunts him, threatens his safety, and has an affair with his father who tries

to drown him. These conflicts elicit unpleasant feelings like anxiety, guilt, and fear for the main character.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses descriptive analysis method with a literary psychology approach that focuses on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory regarding defense mechanism. The research technique is library research to collect required data that support the discussion of this study.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The story is told in first-person narration and the main character is left unnamed. There are two plotlines, the main one recurring in the past where he is described as a seven-year old boy, and the present time that only appears at the start and at the end of the novel where he has grown up to be an adult man who has experienced a divorce and has children of his own. His character is laid out as a lonely and unhappy child whose escapism is fictional books: *"I lived in books more than I lived anywhere else."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.17); *"I was not scared of anything when I read my book: I was far away..."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.69); *"Books were safer than other people anyway."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.12); *"I went away in my head, into a book. That was where I went whenever real life was too hard or too inflexible."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.77). It makes him feel braver and more insignificant, whereas in real life he feels unseen and scared.

This is sublimation, defined as unwanted and uncomfortable feelings into socially acceptable actions as a form of distraction (Minderop, 2010). The main character resorts to his books whenever he is feeling uncomfortable. He does this when none of his friends come to his seventh birthday party:

"I unwrapped the newspaper around the pass-the-parcel gift myself, revealing a blue plastic Batman figure. I was sad that nobody had come to my

party, but happy that I had a Batman figure, and there was a birthday present waiting to be read, a boxed set of the Narnia books, which I took upstairs. I lay on the bed and lost myself in the stories." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 11-12)

His id wants his friends to come, and he feels neurotic anxiety for the clashing of his want and the reality, therefore the id protects itself due to the feeling of inferiority from not being able to sate his desire. He swallows down his disappointment with sublimation by reading the books he receives as presents and is happy to *lose* himself in the stories. He continues to do this all throughout the story, after Ursula Monkton, the monster disguised as his housekeeper, threatens him: *"I read Sandie Sees it Through, another of my mother's book."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.86), then when he feels anxious after he sees his father acting suspiciously sweet to Ursula: *"I climbed up into my bedroom window... and down to my bed, where I read a book about a girl..."* (Gaiman, 2013, p.89).

The main character feels inferior and helpless when he is interacting with adults, and believe that they will belittle him and will not help him: *"I knew enough about adults to know that if I did tell them what had happened, I would not be believed. Adults rarely seemed to believe me when I told the truth anyway."* (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 37). Therefore, he feels the need to be obedient to prevent conflict, such as when Ursula forces him to call her "ma'am", and he obeys but feel bad about it (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 75). It evokes moral anxiety because his superego wants order and to be a good kid, but the reality anxiety triggered by Ursula's threat bends him to her will. This causes neurotic anxiety because he is afraid that the impulses to defend himself against Ursula (an adult) will end up in punishment.

Fantasy is a form of sublimation where unreachable and unacceptable desires are channeled to imagination (Grohol, 2022), and to find solution by resorting to imagination rather than reality (Minderop, 2010). Trying to cope with his loneliness, he imagines himself as someone else: "We would be like Dick

Whittongton and his cat, I knew, or, if Fluffy proved particular intelligent, we would be the miller's son and Puss in Boots." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 13). He also uses fantasy when Ursula Monkton forbids him to leave the house: "There would be raindrops blown on to my face, too, if I was lucky, and I would imagine that I was in my boat on the ocean and that it was swaying with the swell of the sea. I did not imagine that I was a pirate, or that I was going anywhere. I was just on my boat." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 79).

He experiences repression when his only companion, Fluffy the black cat, got run over by the opal miner living in his house. Repression is when you remove painful experiences from your conscious mind (Schacter, Gilbert, Nock, & Wegner, 2020). His reaction when the opal miner brings him another cat to replace Fluffy is repression: "I missed Fluffy. I knew you could not simply replace something alive, but I dared not grumble to my parents about it. They would have been baffled at my upset: after all, if my kitten had been killed, it had also been replaced. The damage had been made up." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 15-16). The main character accepts his death solemnly because he knows his parents would think he is being unreasonable. He represses his own sadness and grief. When he finds a worm inside his foot, he represses the incident by not talking to anyone about it: "The incident of the worm in my foot did not scare me. I did not talk about it." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 67). Every instances where he reads a book after encountering events that evoke anxiety is also an act of repression, because he pushes down conscious thoughts to subconscious realm.

During the present time, the main character visits his old house where he experiences traumatic time and meet the Hempstock who take him under their wings and help him when he is being abused. Lettie, the same age girl who is his first friend, sacrifices her life to save him. The incident causes him overwhelming guilt and grief, especially because he thinks everything leading to her demise is his fault: "I wish I had never let go of Lettie's hand. Ursula Monkton was my fault, I was sure of it, and I would not be able to get rid of her..." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 72); "... I would go down to the Hempstocks' farm,

and tell Lettie what I had done, and she would forgive me..." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 83); "It was my fault. I'm sorry." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 134).

His ego represses that painful memory and distorts it by creating a false new one where Lettie is just moving to Australia: "I was getting tired. The party had been fun, although I could not remember much about it. [...] Australia was a long, long way away. I wondered how long it would be until she came back from Australia with her father. Years, I supposed. Australia was on the other side of the world, across the ocean..." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 222). He represses the reality resulting in him not remembering any of it even years later: "I don't remember." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 229), and even forgetting about the monster Ursula Monkton who makes his life a living hell: "I could not remember why I disliked Ursula Monkton so much..." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 223).

"Nobody come to my seventh birthday party... When it became obvious that nobody was coming, my mother lit the seven candles on the cake, and I blew them out... I was sad that nobody had come to my birthday party." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 11-12)

Rationalization is when someone supplies a reasonable explanation for unacceptable feelings and behaviours as justification to conceal, mostly from oneself, one's underlying motives or feelings. It also softens the blow to connected disappointments (Corey, 2013; Schacter, Gilbert, Nock, & Wegner, 2020). The main character does this in response to his birthday party:

"I do not remember ever asking any of the other children in my class at school why they had not come to my party. I did not need to ask them. They were not my friends, after all. They were just the people I went to school with. I made friends slowly, when I made them." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 13)

He justifies his friends not coming to his birthday party by convincing himself that

they are not his friends after all. This softens the disappointment of his id wanting friends and validation, and by doing so the ego protects itself. "I had books, now I had my kitten." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 13) is his way to rationalize that uncomfortable and unattainable want by creating this thought that he already has everything he needs with his books and Fluffy so he does not need friends anyway.

Although he admits to being scared after he finds a worm in his ankle: "I had been fearless, but now I was such a frightened child." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 67), he continues to say that he isn't: "The incident of the worm in my foot did not scare me. I did not talk about it." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 67). It's a real threat, which is a form of reality anxiety. He rationalizes that fear by convincing himself that it is a normal occurrence and that everyone has experienced it: "I was not scared by this. It was obviously just something that happened to people, like when the neighbour's cat, Misty, had worms. I had a worm in my foot, and I was removing the worm." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 63).

Denial interferes with the perception of reality by distorting what the individual thinks, feels, or perceives in a traumatic situation (Cramer, 2015; Corey, 2013). His first reaction to Fluffy's death is dismissing it as a joke: "I reached out, lifted the top flap of the box, wondering if this was a joke, if my kitten would be in there." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 14); "It felt like a bad joke." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 15). Even after knowing the full truth of what happened to Fluffy, he still denies it and perceives the situation as a joke and is convinced that Fluffy is still waiting for him under the box.

The opal miner commits suicide in the back of the main character's dad's car. When the main character encounters his dead body, he starts calling him as an *it*: "... so I saw it. It was an it, the thing I was looking at, not a him." (Gaiman, 2013, p. 22). He compares the opal miner's dead body to Madame Tussauds waxworks in London.

"... none of the waxworks had looked convincing. They could not truly look

dead, because they did not ever look alive. [...] The thing in the back seat that had been covered by the blue blanket... was not convincing either. It looked a little like the opal miner, but it was dressed in a black suit, with a white ruffled shirt and a black bow tie. Its hair was slicked back and artificially shiny. Its eyes were staring. Its lips were bluish, but its skin was very red. It looked like a parody of health. There was no gold chain around its neck." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 23)

He references the opal miner as an *it* to relate him to waxworks, calling him a *thing* and a *parody* of health, all of these assigning him and reducing him to a nonhuman attributes. This is his way to process and deny the grim reality of his suicide by attributing him to something that was never alive, so he does not have to deal with the fact that he used to know this person, but he is now a corpse in his dad's car.

When he wakes up and finds a shilling stuck in his throat, he takes it out with his fingers and is struck with fear: "I washed my mouth out, drank directly from the cold tap, spat red into the white sink. Only when I'd done that did I sit on the side of the white bathtub and open my hand. I was scared." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 37). This fear is a form of reality anxiety. He processes it by denying the shilling's existence in an attempt to diminish that overwhelming feeling: "I did not look at the thing. It was tight in my hand, slimy with my saliva and my phlegm. I did not want to look at it. I did not want it to exist..." (Gaiman, 2013:37).

After Ursula Monkton threatens him and lock him in his own room, the main character cries in terror: "I cried then, cold and still damp, in that bedroom, cried with pain and anger and terror..." (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 100). Seeing a window to escape, the main character finds solace in denying the terrifying reality by distorting reality that he is safe and sound in his room, and not out in the ledge of his window drenched in the rain:

“I’m in my bed, I thought. I’m lying in my bed, thinking about how upset I am. Soon, I’ll fall asleep. I’m in my bed, and I know she’s won, and if she checks up on me I’m in my bed, asleep... I’m in my bed, and it’s time for me to sleep now... I can’t even keep my eyes open. I’m fast asleep. Fast asleep in my bed.” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 101)

He does this several times: “I am on my bed, I thought. I was not here, with the light of the TV room, uncurtained, spilling out below me, making the rain that fell past the window into a series of glittering lines and streaks.” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 102); “... and I thought, I’m in bed. I’m dreaming all this. Such vivid dreams. I am in bed...” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 104); “I froze where I was, closed my eyes, imagined myself asleep in my bed...” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 106). He denies the scary truth of the situation and creates a new safety net where he isn’t in danger by performing the defense mechanism of denial.

To deny himself of Ursula’s very real threat, he refuses to acknowledge her existence: “Ursula Monkton wasn’t real. She was a cardboard mask for the thing that had travelled inside me as a worm, that had flapped and gusted in the open country under that orange sky.” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 79-80), then comparing her to a just a figure with rubber mask: “They were wearing rubber masks, and it was always our heroes underneath, but I wondered what would happen if Ursula Monkton pulled off her face, what would be underneath that?” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 83)

Identification is when a person deals with threat and anxiety by unconsciously taking characteristics of a more capable and powerful person and is a defensive reaction for people who feel inferior (Corey, 2013; Schacter, Gilbert, Nock, & Wegner, 2020). For the main character who relies on fictional heroes to feel insignificant, he looks up to Batman in his scared moments. As he tries to climb out of his window to escape from Ursula menacing form, he identifies with Batman and characters from his fictional books: “I went down, a step at a time, imagining myself Batman, imagining

myself a hundred heroes and heroines of school romances...” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 102); “I went down, a step at a time, imagining myself Batman, imagining myself a hundred heroes and heroines of school romances...” (Gaiman, 2013, pg. 102). He gains strength and bravery by relating himself to these people who he consider mighty and strong.

IV. CONCLUSION

Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory states that there are three components of the unconscious: id, ego, and superego. The urges and impulses from the unconscious affect how an individual acts and behaves. When the interactions between these three elements evoke a sense of anxiety, the ego will protect itself by performing defense mechanism.

The main character in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* experiences internal conflicts when he has to deal with death (Fluffy’s accident and the opal miner’s suicide), loneliness because he does not have any friends, isolation from his family caused by distrust and belittlement, and Ursula who challenges the tranquility of his life. Ursula is described not only as a dangerous monster who hurts him physically, but also someone who invades his personal life by abusing him verbally and mentally.

These conflicts elicit unwanted feelings like disappointment, sadness, loneliness, and sense of inferiority. The main character is shown to perform defense mechanism in an attempt to ease these uncomfortable and anxiety-inducing feelings.

The main character is described to perform rationalization when none of his friends come to his seventh birthday party by rationalizing his disappointment. He rationalizes his fear when he finds a worm in his feet by convincing himself that it is a normal occurrence for everyone.

He performs sublimation by reading his fictional books, because it is explained that he considers it as an escapism to get away from reality. He also does sublimation in the form of

fantasy when he is described to fantasize about being in a boat in the middle of the sea.

It is elaborated that he performs denial when he refuses to accept Fluffy and the opal miner's death. When he is in the middle of danger, it is described that he distorts the reality by imagining that he is safe in his bed and not on the run to escape Ursula. He denies the existence of Ursula Monkton. When he feels scared and inferior, he identifies with a figure he thinks is strong and brave, Batman.

He experiences reality anxiety when he has to bear Ursula's threat, both physically and mentally, and when he finds the shilling in his throat. His neurotic anxiety is described when he has to accept the fact that he has no friends. The main character's superego is shown to desire obedience, especially to adults, and therefore the uncomfortable feelings of moral anxiety and neurotic anxiety appear when he disobeys and rebels against their order.

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the main character's ego protects himself from the anxiety evoked from these traumatic experiences by performing defense mechanisms, namely rationalization, sublimation, denial, identification, and repression.

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