
Lenora Hope's Defense Mechanism Portrayed in Riley Sager's *The Only One Left*Alifa Ramadhan^{1✉}, Itsna Syahadatud Dinurriyah²

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This study analyzes the defense mechanisms of one of the characters in Riley Sager's novel, *The Only One Left*. This study is approached using Sigmund Freud's theory and refined by his daughter, Anna Freud. The researcher's method is library research, drawing data from library materials, primary data from the novel's narrative and original text, and secondary data from supporting books and scientific articles. The results of the study indicate that Lenora Hope uses denial, identification, repression, and suppression. Lenora uses the method of denial when the police arrive and have not even said anything, uses identification to change her identity to her disabled sister, reflects repression when she chooses to remain silent for decades about the truth of the tragedy, and she uses suppression when Lenora bribes one of her former domestic workers to remain silent. By combining the views of Freud and Anna Freud, this study concludes that Lenora's defense mechanisms function not only as evidence of emotional disturbance but also as adaptive strategies in dealing with trauma and maintaining self-image.

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic experiences often leave deep marks on an individual's psychology. This leads to behavioral changes in character development and in the way individuals interact with others (Daud et al., 2008). Ironically, this traumatic experience can arise in various situations. In social interactions, traumatic experiences can be generated through several things, such as being a victim of bullying, receiving hate speech, and social pressure that has a direct impact on mental health. According to Safitri et al. (2023), bullying and hate speech can affect a child's emotional stability system in behavior, and change a child's character to follow his subconscious mind in defending himself.

In many cases, individuals unconsciously use defense mechanisms to protect themselves from difficult situations they face, disrupting their emotional stability. One of the defense mechanisms is denial, where a person refuses to acknowledge certain situations or facts to protect themselves from mental stress. In a literary work, the theme of trauma and defense mechanisms is often central, and it appears in novels as a character's response to trauma or difficult situations they face. Therefore, analyzing literary works through this theory can provide deep insight into how a character deals with difficult situations.

The novel *The Only One Left* was first published in the United States by the American writer Riley Sager in June 2023. This is an example of a literary work that raises the theme of trauma and self-defense mechanisms. In this storyline, the main character, Lenora Hope, reflects the theme of her defense mechanisms. Lenora, who experiences a depressed mental condition due to the tragedy of the murder that befell her family, applies a self-defense mechanism through the transformation of her old identity into Mrs. Baker. As Freud said, the self-defense theory posits unconscious actions that individuals believe help them cope with emotional stress (Freud & Hall, 1921).

After engaging with *The Only One Left*, the researcher is interested in analyzing the story's defense mechanisms. This novel has received widespread acclaim from readers and popular critics, as evidenced by the numerous reviews in mainstream media. Unfortunately, to date, the author has not found any academic research that examines this novel in depth. Therefore, the author hopes to fill the research gap on this novel. There is a lot of literature on defense mechanisms and denial in

psychoanalytic studies and classical literature. However, the application of these theories to contemporary literature, especially in the mystery-thriller genre, is still underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how defense mechanisms, especially denial, function in the text. By focusing on *The Only One Left* (2023), this study contributes to the provision of a contemporary perspective on psychological defense in literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychoanalysis Theory

Psychoanalysis is a theory and method for understanding the human psyche, especially the role of the subconscious mind (S. Freud & Hall, 1921b). As the founder of psychoanalytic theory, Freud said there are two distinct human minds: the conscious and the subconscious. Conscious thought is a mental activity that occurs with the individual's full awareness and helps an individual think critically, store memories and knowledge, arouse emotions, and perform physical activities (Das, 2021). On the other hand, the subconscious mind supports the conscious mind by re-evaluating past experiences, so it is not surprising if an individual has intuition that often appears in his mind, because his subconscious mind works and then provides reflexes in the form of automatic insights from the results of previous experiences (Das, 2021). Thus, the existence of psychoanalytic literary theory can enrich researchers' insights into how the subconscious mind manifests in a character's behavior within a storyline.

Defense Mechanism Theory

The theory of defense mechanisms is a way for an individual to cope with internal conflicts arising from a condition. In line with Freud, the father of psychoanalysis and the main basis for self-defense mechanisms, said that defense mechanisms are strategies by the individual's subconscious mind to protect itself. In other words, a self-defense mechanism reflects an individual's id, ego, and superego, which are expressed through behavior that adjusts to reduce the conflict they experience (Tang & Peng, 2022). In this theory, S. Freud (1921) divides the conservation mechanism into 5 parts: Denial, Projection, Regression, Repression, and Rationalization. This theory was then perfected by Anna Freud in her book

entitled *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (Freud A, 1936), which describes it into 10 stages of self-defense mechanisms, namely: repression, regression, reaction formation, isolation, cancellation, projection, introjection, turning against oneself, reversal, and sublimation. Thus, the theory of defense mechanisms is certainly important to literary research seeking to understand individual behavior in a literary work.

Denial

Denial is one of the main defense mechanisms. In Freud's theory, denial is a conscious or unconscious rejection of the truth that threatens the individual (S. Freud & Hall, 1921). This mechanism is based on individual anxiety or emotional stress, thus encouraging the individual to deny reality to protect themselves. By using this mechanism, a person can protect their ego from extraordinary emotional stress (Cramer, 2008). In practice, a person will try to erase reality, he rejects the existence of the truth, and he can even pretend that a situation did not really happen. As further explained by Anna Freud in her work entitled *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, denial allows individuals to cope with threatening issues about themselves (Freud, A., 1936). She also emphasized that this mechanism is widely used to deal with traumatic events and fears experienced by individuals. Therefore, this mechanism is believed to maintain the character's psychological stability and enable them to cope with excessive stress.

Identification

As Anna Freud believed, identification in a self-defense mechanism is a way for someone to take on another person's identity to reduce the anxiety experienced due to a problem that occurs. She also added that identification can occur in two ways: positively (by building an identity) or defensively (by escaping threats) (A. Freud, 1936). Identification is a strategy individuals often use to defend themselves because it indirectly encourages them to adapt to another figure, whom they consider safer or more trustworthy. This is also consistent with Békés & Perry (2016): individuals trapped in stressful situations will use identification to maintain ego function and prevent psychological disintegration.

Repression

As explained by Sigmund Freud, repression is a primary defense mechanism in

the subconscious to suppress urges or thoughts that cause anxiety (S. Freud & Hall, 1921). Anna Freud emphasized that repression often occurs in cases of severe trauma (Freud, A., 1936). She believed that traumatic experiences are not forgotten but will remain stored in the individual's subconscious and can reappear in the form of other symptoms, such as compulsive behavior or nightmares. McLeod (2025) asserted that repression causes individuals to store traumatic memories so that they cannot be consciously recalled, thus protecting the ego from excessive anxiety.

Suppression

Unlike repression, suppression is a conscious defense mechanism. Anna Freud (1936) emphasized that suppression is an active, conscious effort by individuals to eliminate thoughts or feelings that cause stress. Suppression naturally maintains ego stability and allows individuals to function calmly in social life. While repression is an outcome beyond the individual's control, suppression is more strategic. With this strategy, individuals can distract themselves, choose to postpone thinking about a problem, and even hide the truth (Merlo et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this research, the researcher used a qualitative approach, which was most appropriate for this study, given that the data analyzed consisted of narratives and dialogues from the novel *The Only One Left* by Riley Sager. Supporting data came from the novel and relevant book reviews. Thus, this research falls into the category of library research. When collecting data, the researcher read the novel *The Only One Left* carefully to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the story. Afterward, the researcher noted quotes that characterized Lenora Hope's use of several methods to defend herself, then analyzed them using Sigmund Freud's and Anna Freud's theory of self-defense mechanisms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Denial

In the story, Lenora Hope demonstrates a defense mechanism of denial when the murder tragedy has just begun. This aligns with Anna Freud's theory that denial is a spontaneous psychological reaction to protect the ego from the pressures faced.

"They looked at me like I was a maniac," she says. "Even though I'd done nothing wrong. The first words I told them were 'It wasn't me.' Which only made them suspect me more. Even when the police had just arrived at her home and had not yet questioned her, Lenora loudly defended herself, saying, *"It wasn't me."* Furthermore, she felt anxiety and psychological trauma from witnessing her family's tragic situation.

Therefore, when the police arrived, she spontaneously wanted to defend herself to avoid being named a murder suspect. This made the police even more suspicious. As Freud emphasized, the denial mechanism is an individual's automatic way of coping with excessive anxiety. In Lenora's case, her denial was a spontaneous response to trauma and feelings of guilt she was unable to overcome, leading to excessive anxiety. *"They sat me down in the dining room and asked me all sorts of awful questions. Who else was here? Did I have a reason to want my family dead? And I just kept giving them the same answer: 'It wasn't me. It wasn't me.'"* Lenora's denial was also recorded when the police questioned her, asking several questions, and she continued to deny it, answering, "It wasn't me." Lenora repeated this several times after the questions were directed at her, demonstrating Lenora's genuine desire to defend herself.

Identification

Besides denial, identity transformation is a form of self-defense mechanism that emerges in Lenora Hope's story. This mechanism is complex because it contains elements of both denial and identification. In the story, Lenora assumes the identity of Mrs. Baker, her former housekeeper who has moved away, while her sister, Virginia, is given the identity "Lenora Hope." In line with Anna Freud's concept, identification occurs when someone deliberately assumes another person's identity to survive external or internal threats. *I tried! No one believed me! In everyone's mind, Lenora Hope had slaughtered her family. I couldn't continue to be her. I would have been as much a captive in this house as my sister. And what good would that have done? Virginia couldn't talk, couldn't walk, couldn't do anything. By pushing my identity onto her—* For Lenora, becoming Mrs. Baker provided a sense of social and emotional security. This transformation served to hide from social situations and painful memories of her past trauma. By undergoing this transformation, Lenora developed adaptive defenses that allowed her to cope with emotional stress and

maintain psychological stability. After the investigation, the police still named Lenora as the prime suspect, though not officially, due to a lack of evidence. Lenora gave Virginia the identity of "Lenora," while using the identity of Mrs. Baker, one of the employees who had left. She exploited Virginia's serious condition after attempting suicide and giving birth, leaving her unable to speak or fight back if she was not the real Lenora. This served as another form of resistance for Lenora, denying the accusations, which led her to change her previous identity.

Repression

Another form of self-defense that Lenora highlights in the story is repression. Freud explained that repression is an unconscious mechanism for suppressing severe anxiety into the unconscious. This is consistent with Lenora's case, which chose to remain silent about the truth for 54 years after the incident. Her decades-long stay demonstrates how Lenora attempts to suppress her guilt over traumatic memories. As Anna Freud argued, repression allows individuals to displace heavy emotions into the unconscious to protect the ego. Furthermore, she disguises herself as Mrs. Baker and persistently tries to prevent Virginia (the fake Lenora) from writing a story on a typewriter to tell the truth to her nanny. In this way, the real Lenora can relieve the stress she previously experienced, while also alleviating her psychological distress, which is also a sign of Lenora Hope's denial. In this case, repression is evident in her choice to keep her family tragedy a secret for decades. Lenora's choice to remain silent for 54 years reflects her subconscious attempt to suppress guilt, trauma, and anxiety so that they do not interfere with her daily life.

Suppression

Unlike unconscious repression, suppression is a conscious mechanism that individuals use to alleviate excessive anxiety. In Lenora Hope's case, suppression is evident in her actions throughout the story. She bribes one of her former employees to keep her secret, who also knows that Lenora deliberately changed her identity to Mrs. Baker. This action is not simply unconscious repression, but rather a conscious strategy to control the situation, protect oneself from social legal threats, and avoid revealing secrets that could reveal the truth of the family tragedy. *"I'll stay silent and look the other way if you and your family pay up." I stayed completely still, stunned. "How much?" "Fifty thousand dollars should be enough," she said before tacking on a threat I was certain she'd carry out. "For now. You have until*

tomorrow night to think it over.” Lenora paid Berniece Mayhew, one of the Hope family's former employees, fifty thousand dollars a month to keep the police from arresting her. This happened because Berniece saw her carrying a knife from the kitchen on the night of the crime, which was used to cut the umbilical cord of Virginia's newborn baby, right before the murders began. Seeing Lenora's dangerous situation, Berniece assumed Lenora's knife was the cause of the murders that night, when in fact she had only taken the knife to cut the umbilical cord of the baby and Virginia, her sister. She also paid her loyal employees who were still working after the murder, namely the Hope family chef, who was still serving her.

CONCLUSION(S)

Based on the study of the novel *The Only One Left* by Riley Sager, it can be concluded that Lenora uses 4 self-defense mechanisms to overcome the problems she faces: Denial, Suppression, Repression, and Identification. By using the Denial mechanism, Lenora can remain emotionally stable. She tries to defend herself against events that make her depressed. From these four mechanisms, it can be concluded that Lenora's actions are indeed used for emotional stability and survival after experiencing deep trauma. With suppression, Lenora consciously controls her emotions to hide the secrets she keeps for her own safety; this mechanism helps her to remain calm, thus protecting her from social and legal threats. Lenora then, through repression, buried her traumatic memories in her subconscious to prevent them from haunting her. This mechanism allows her to continue living without having to face the trauma and forget it. Furthermore, through identification, Lenora can escape from her past. She protects herself from the fear of being herself, who faces significant threats. This can certainly help her live a peaceful life. With this, the study proves that self-defense mechanisms are highly functional in the context of literary characters, allowing them to describe how humans deal with stressful trauma in life.

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