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DEFENSIVE BEHAVIORS IN RELATION TO LONELINESS IN THE FILM *A MAN CALLED OTTO*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how defensive behaviors associated with loneliness are portrayed through Otto Anderson's characterization in *A Man Called Otto* (2022), directed by Marc Forster. It explores how his actions, dialogue, and interactions reflect his responses to loneliness following his wife's death. Using a descriptive qualitative method and a psychoanalytic approach to film criticism, the study draws on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective and Anna Freud's concept of defense mechanisms. The data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, actions, and interactions collected through repeated viewing and documentation. They are analyzed through description, interpretation, and contextual examination. The findings indicate that Otto's anger, avoidance of personal conversations, resistance to change, and initial social withdrawal reflect defensive behaviors associated with loneliness, although they are not automatically categorized as specific defense mechanisms. His interactions with Marisol and Tommy gradually reveal changes in his characterization and social relationships. Unlike previous studies that examine psychological mechanisms or loneliness separately, this study connects both aspects through character development and narrative progression. It offers insights for English literature and film studies, particularly in literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and film analysis, while emphasizing the importance of interpreting psychological representations without making clinical diagnoses.

Keywords: Defensive Behaviors, Loneliness, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Characterization, A Man Called Otto.

1. INTRODUCTION

Films, similar to literary works such as novels and short stories, portray human experiences through characterization, dialogue, actions, and interpersonal relationships. These elements provide opportunities to examine characters' psychological conditions and internal conflicts through psychoanalytic film criticism (Purnama & Kurniati, 2025; Setyo & Nugroho, 2024). Among the psychological experiences frequently depicted in films is loneliness, which may be reflected in social withdrawal, difficulties in establishing communication, and limited interpersonal connections. Peplau and Perlman (1982) conceptualized loneliness as an unpleasant experience resulting from perceived deficiencies in a person's social relationships. Similarly, Weiss (1973) differentiated loneliness into two forms: emotional loneliness, which develops from the absence of an intimate attachment, and social loneliness, which arises from insufficient social networks. These distinctions are particularly relevant to narratives involving bereavement, as losing a spouse may affect both emotional attachment and social relationships (Engel et al., 2023; Niino et al., 2025). Recent research has also highlighted the relationship between prolonged grief, social contact, and community belongingness

in understanding loneliness among bereaved individuals (Cunningham et al., 2025).

One film that illustrates the psychological consequences of bereavement and social disconnection is *A Man Called Otto* (Forster, 2022). The story centers on Otto Anderson, a widower who experiences difficulties adjusting to life following the death of his wife, Sonya. His characterization is marked by strictness, irritability, anger, and reluctance to engage in social interactions. He frequently avoids personal conversations and demonstrates resistance toward changes in his surroundings. These characteristics can be examined in relation to the emotional difficulties associated with losing a significant attachment. Research on widowhood has indicated that spousal loss may contribute to loneliness and social isolation, particularly when individuals experience changes in their emotional and social support systems (Freak-Poli et al., 2025; Vedder et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Otto's interactions with his neighbors, particularly Marisol and Tommy, gradually reveal a shift in his relationships and willingness to connect with others. His developing interactions provide a narrative context for examining how loneliness and emotional responses to loss are portrayed through characterization.

Otto's behaviors can further be interpreted through a psychoanalytic perspective, particularly Sigmund Freud's theory of personality and the ego's role in managing internal conflicts (Freud, 1923/1961). Anna Freud (1936/1966) further explained that defense mechanisms operate as psychological processes through which the ego manages anxiety and emotional distress. These mechanisms provide a theoretical basis for examining how individuals respond to psychologically challenging experiences. Recent discussions of defense mechanisms have continued to emphasize their relevance to understanding defensive processes and emotional functioning (Cooper, 2025; Winborn, 2025). Furthermore, research has explored the relationship between defense mechanisms and psychological symptoms among bereaved individuals, suggesting the relevance of examining defensive responses within the context of loss and mourning (Giunta et al., 2025; Topino & Gori, 2025). In Otto's case, behaviors such as anger, silence, avoidance, and social withdrawal may be interpreted as possible defensive responses; however, they should not automatically be assigned to particular defense mechanisms without considering their narrative and situational contexts. Therefore, psychoanalytic concepts in this study serve as interpretive tools for understanding the character's representation rather than as instruments for establishing a clinical diagnosis.

Previous studies have examined *A Man Called Otto* from different psychological and representational perspectives. Maretha et al. (2025) investigated defense mechanisms in the film, while Wijaya and Kurniawati (2025) explored Otto's inner conflicts through a psychoanalytic approach. Meanwhile, Dzakir and Chandrabuwono (2024) analyzed the representation of loneliness in the main character using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model. Although these studies provide relevant insights into Otto's psychological experiences, the relationship between his defensive behaviors and loneliness remains an important aspect for further examination. Accordingly, the present study investigates how defensive behaviors are represented in relation to loneliness through Otto Anderson's characterization. It specifically examines his expressions of anger, avoidance of emotionally sensitive conversations, resistance to changes following his wife's death, and gradual development of relationships with his neighbors. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic perspective and the concepts of emotional and social loneliness, the study analyzes the film's dialogue, actions, interpersonal interactions, and character development to explain how defensive behaviors are portrayed in connection with Otto's experience of loneliness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Defense Mechanisms in Psychoanalytic Film and Literary Studies

Defense mechanisms are a central concept in psychoanalytic readings of fictional characters. Setyo and Nugroho (2024) applied Freudian defense mechanisms, including denial, projection, displacement,

sublimation, reaction formation, undoing, and isolation, to the protagonist of the film *No Longer Human* by analyzing behavior, dialogue, and symbolism. Purnama and Kurniati (2025) combined Sigmund Freud's theory with Anna Freud's concept of defense mechanisms to read the protagonist of *Garden State*, relating his trauma to repression, projection, and sublimation and to the need for emotional openness and relational support. Yonanta et al. (2025) read a character's movement from isolation to reconnection in the film *Aloners* through attachment and individuation, and presented her change as an ongoing process rather than a complete recovery.

Research in psychoanalysis and psychology also suggests that defenses are better understood as processes than as fixed labels. Cooper (2025) theorizes defensive process within the play framework of analytic work, and Winborn (2025) describes defenses as unconscious processes that protect the ego and the Self from perceived threats while also working against individuation. In bereavement research, Giunta et al. (2025) found that high adaptive defenses were the most central element in a network of defenses and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress among bereaved adults, whereas Topino and Gori (2025) found that neurotic and immature defense mechanisms mediated the link between fearful and preoccupied attachment styles and posttraumatic symptoms after a significant loss.

b. Loneliness and Bereavement

Loneliness is also a prominent theme in research on bereavement. A systematic review shows that widowhood is associated with a greater likelihood of loneliness and that widowed people are, on average, lonelier than married, divorced, and never-married people (Vedder et al., 2024). Niino et al. (2025) reported that loneliness typically peaks soon after the death of a spouse, while evidence on its long-term course is inconsistent. Engel et al. (2023) found that bereaved older adults reported lower quality of life and higher loneliness than older adults in the general population. Freak-Poli et al. (2025) showed that low social isolation and high social support did not prevent increased loneliness after widowhood, and Cunningham et al. (2025) found that loneliness among bereaved adults was positively associated with the severity of prolonged grief and negatively associated with personal contact and community belongingness, with community belongingness as the strongest protective factor.

Studies that adopt Weiss's (1973) distinction further indicate that emotional and social loneliness have different correlates. Vedder et al. (2025) found that emotional loneliness and prolonged grief symptoms were linked within persons over four years after spousal loss, while Wolters et al. (2023) found that social loneliness was most strongly explained by social isolation and emotional loneliness by social anxiety and depression.

c. Previous Studies on A Man Called Otto *and the Research Gap*

Several studies have examined *A Man Called Otto*. Maretha et al. (2025) analyzed the film through Anna Freud's theory and concluded that Otto relies mainly on denial and repression, including rejecting help, isolating himself, and avoiding talk of his late wife, while his friendship with a new neighbor gradually opens him up. Wijaya and Kurniawati (2025) combined Anna Freud's defense mechanism theory with Paul Ekman's nonverbal communication framework to read Otto's inner conflicts. They interpret his anger toward a cashier as displacement and identify further defenses such as projection, reaction formation, and sublimation, together with changes in his body language and tone. Dzakir and Chandrabuwono (2024) used Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics and Weiss's concept of loneliness to examine how loneliness is represented through dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, and social isolation, and concluded that Otto's loneliness is mainly emotional, with social loneliness also present.

These studies show that the film has been read through defense mechanisms and through loneliness, but largely as separate topics. They also tend to assign specific defense mechanisms to Otto's behavior, while less attention has been given to how far

a scene itself supports such labels and to how defensive behaviors and loneliness are represented together through characterization and narrative development. This study addresses that gap.

3. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a psychoanalytic approach to film criticism. The descriptive qualitative method is used to describe and interpret the representation of defensive behaviors in relation to loneliness in *A Man Called Otto* (Forster, 2022). This approach focuses on the elements of the film, particularly Otto Anderson's characterization, dialogue, actions, and interactions with other characters. The psychoanalytic approach is based on Sigmund Freud's perspective (Freud, 1923/1961), with particular attention to the concept of defense mechanisms further developed by Anna Freud (1936/1966). This framework is used to interpret the character's behavior within the context of the film's narrative.

a. Research Object and Data Sources

The object of this study is the representation of defensive behaviors in relation to loneliness through Otto Anderson's characterization in *A Man Called Otto* (Forster, 2022). The primary data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, character actions, and interactions involving Otto Anderson that are relevant to the research focus. Four scenes or scene sequences are discussed in detail: Otto's purchase of rope at the hardware store, his conversation with Marisol about having children, her suggestion that he remove Sonya's belongings, and his interactions with Marisol and Tommy, including accepting food and lending tools. The secondary data consist of scholarly books, journal articles, and previous studies related to psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms, loneliness, characterization, and film analysis. These sources provide theoretical support for interpreting the selected scenes.

b. Data Collection Technique

The data are collected through observation and documentation. First, the researcher watches *A Man Called Otto* repeatedly to understand the storyline and Otto's character development. Second, the researcher identifies scenes that represent loneliness, emotional distress, and defensive behaviors. Third, relevant scenes are documented by recording their timestamps, dialogues, character actions, and narrative contexts. Finally, the researcher selects the scenes based on their relevance to the research objectives and examines them within the context of the film.

c. Data Analysis

The data are analyzed using a descriptive qualitative process supported by Freud's psychoanalytic perspective. First, the selected scenes are described by examining Otto's dialogue, actions, expressions, and interactions with other characters. Second, the identified behaviors are interpreted using relevant concepts of defense mechanisms, particularly those discussed by Anna Freud (1936/1966). Third, the analysis examines how these behaviors are represented in relation to Otto's loneliness, emotional struggles, and social relationships throughout the film, drawing on Peplau and Perlman's (1982) discussion of loneliness and Weiss's (1973) distinction between emotional and social loneliness. Finally, the findings are organized into several discussion areas based on the patterns found in the selected scenes. Each interpretation is supported by evidence from the film and relevant theoretical sources. The analysis focuses on the representation of character behavior within a fictional narrative and does not attempt to provide a clinical diagnosis or establish direct causal relationships between loneliness and defensive behaviors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Anger and Emotional Frustration

Otto Anderson is characterized as a strict and easily irritated man who often reacts negatively when situations do not meet his expectations. One example appears in the scene at a hardware store when Otto tries to buy rope. After the clerk explains that the store charges by the yard, Otto responds, "What the hell kind of computer can't do simple math?" (Forster, 2022). His reaction creates tension between him and the clerk, even though the situation begins with an ordinary purchase.

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From a characterization perspective, this scene presents Otto as a man who has difficulty controlling his outward reactions during everyday interactions. His dialogue shows frustration, while his response to the clerk creates an uncomfortable social situation. The film uses this interaction to establish Otto's strict personality and his tendency to distance himself from other people. His anger becomes an important part of how the character is presented to the audience.

Freud's psychoanalytic perspective provides a framework for discussing the relationship between emotional conflict and outward behavior (Freud, 1923/1961). Anna Freud (1936/1966) further explains how defense mechanisms may function as ways of managing emotional distress. However, Otto's anger in this particular scene cannot automatically be classified as displacement or another specific defense mechanism because the scene does not clearly show that he redirects an emotion from another situation toward the clerk. This differs from Wijaya and Kurniawati (2025), who read Otto's anger toward a cashier as displacement of grief. The difference does not invalidate their interpretation. It shows that the scene supports a more cautious claim when it is read on its own, and that a displacement reading depends on connecting the scene to Otto's grief in the wider narrative.

The broader narrative provides additional context for understanding Otto's behavior. Following Sonya's death, he experiences emotional difficulties and becomes increasingly distant from other people. Although the film presents these experiences alongside his anger, it does not directly establish loneliness as the cause of his reaction. Instead, the scene demonstrates how Otto's hostile responses contribute to his characterization as an emotionally guarded person who struggles with social interaction.

b. Avoidance of Emotional Pain and Loneliness

Another important aspect of Otto's characterization is his tendency to avoid emotionally sensitive conversations. This behavior can be seen when Marisol asks whether Otto and Sonya ever thought about having children. Instead of answering her question, Otto replies only with the time, "Well, 2:00" (Forster, 2022). His response changes the direction of the conversation and prevents Marisol from receiving a direct answer.

The scene presents Otto's reluctance to discuss personal experiences through both dialogue and action. Marisol attempts to create a more personal conversation, but Otto responds by focusing on the time. This contrast shows the difference between Marisol's willingness to communicate and Otto's tendency to keep his personal life private. Through this interaction, the film represents emotional distance as part of Otto's characterization.

Anna Freud's (1936/1966) discussion of defense mechanisms provides a theoretical perspective for examining how individuals may respond to emotional distress. Otto's change of subject can be interpreted as a possible form of emotional avoidance, which is consistent with Maretha et al. (2025), who describe Otto as avoiding talk of his late wife. However, the scene does not provide enough evidence to identify a specific unconscious defense mechanism such as denial or repression. Therefore, this analysis focuses on his observable response rather than making a definite psychological classification.

The scene also contributes to the representation of loneliness in the film. Peplau and Perlman (1982) discuss loneliness in relation to deficiencies in social relationships, while Weiss (1973) distinguishes emotional loneliness from social loneliness. Although Otto is physically interacting with Marisol, he does not participate in an emotionally open conversation. This moment shows that loneliness is not represented only through physical isolation but also through limited emotional communication, which is consistent with Dzakir and Chandrabuwono's (2024) finding that emotional loneliness in the film is conveyed through dialogue, facial expressions, and gestures that reflect a loss of intimacy. The film uses Otto's dialogue and interaction with Marisol to show the distance that remains between him and the people who attempt to connect with him.

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c. Emotional Conflict and Resistance to Change

Otto's emotional conflict becomes more visible when Marisol suggests that getting rid of Sonya's belongings can help him move on. Otto responds firmly, "I don't wanna move on" (Forster, 2022). During the conversation, he expresses how important Sonya was to him and explains that she represented everything in his life. His words show that his relationship with Sonya remains central to his emotional experience.

From a literary perspective, Sonya's belongings function as meaningful objects within the narrative because they represent Otto's memories of their relationship. Marisol's suggestion creates a conflict between the possibility of accepting changes in his present life and Otto's desire to preserve the memories of his wife. His dialogue directly expresses his resistance to moving forward, while the conversation reveals the emotional significance of the objects connected to Sonya.

Freud's psychoanalytic perspective can help interpret this moment as a representation of emotional conflict between painful experiences and the demands of present circumstances (Freud, 1923/1961). Anna Freud's (1936/1966) discussion of defense mechanisms also provides a framework for examining responses to emotional distress. However, Otto's refusal to remove Sonya's belongings should not automatically be classified as denial, even though Maretha et al. (2025) and Wijaya and Kurniawati (2025) identify denial in other parts of the film. In this scene, he openly acknowledges that he does not want to move on, so the scene does not provide sufficient evidence that he is unconsciously refusing to recognize Sonya's death.

The scene also illustrates the relationship between grief and loneliness in Otto's characterization. His attachment to Sonya remains emotionally important, while his interactions with other people introduce the possibility of developing new relationships. Research on bereaved adults provides a useful background for reading this pairing of grief and loneliness. Loneliness is common after the loss of a spouse (Niino et al., 2025; Vedder et al., 2024), may not be prevented by social support alone (Freak-Poli et al., 2025), and emotional loneliness in particular has been linked with prolonged grief symptoms (Vedder et al., 2025). These studies concern real bereaved adults rather than fictional characters, so they are used here only as context. Through this dialogue, the film presents the difficulty of adjusting to life after losing someone important. Rather than showing emotional change as an immediate process, the narrative presents Otto's struggle through his words, reactions, and relationship with Marisol.

d. Loneliness and the Development of Social Relationships

Although Otto initially appears distant and unwilling to interact with others, his relationships with his neighbors reveal another aspect of his characterization. His interactions with Marisol and Tommy show that he is not completely separated from the people around him. Two examples can be seen when he accepts food from Marisol and when he lends tools to Tommy. These actions differ from his earlier reactions in which he often responds with irritation or avoids personal conversations.

From the perspective of characterization, these ordinary interactions show changes in how Otto responds to other people. Accepting food and lending tools are simple actions, but they create opportunities for communication and repeated social contact. The film presents the development of relationships through everyday activities rather than through one dramatic event. These moments also show that Otto's behavior is more complex than his initial appearance as a strict and socially distant man.

Peplau and Perlman (1982) discussion of loneliness helps explain why social relationships are important in understanding Otto's character. Weiss (1973) also distinguishes emotional loneliness from social loneliness. In the film, Otto begins to participate in social interactions with his neighbors, but these actions do not necessarily mean that his loneliness has completely disappeared. This reading is consistent with Freak-Poli et al. (2025), who found that social support did not prevent increased loneliness after widowhood, and

with Yonanta et al. (2025), who present a character's reconnection as an ongoing process. It also fits Cunningham et al.'s (2025) finding that community belongingness was the strongest protective factor against loneliness among bereaved adults, since the neighbors' repeated everyday contact places Otto within a small community rather than a single relationship. Instead, these actions show that opportunities for social connection gradually become part of his life, a development that Maretha et al. (2025) and Dzakir and Chandrabuwono (2024) also associate with his relationships with his neighbors.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, these interactions can be examined alongside the earlier scenes to understand the contrast between Otto's withdrawal and his growing willingness to engage with others. However, accepting food or lending tools should not be classified as specific defense mechanisms because these actions do not provide sufficient evidence for such an interpretation. They are more directly understood as changes in his interpersonal behavior. Winborn (2025) notes that defenses preserve stability but can work against growth, and this tension is useful for describing Otto's movement from withdrawal toward connection without assigning a specific mechanism to each action.

Overall, the film represents Otto's loneliness and defensive behaviors through the development of his characterization and relationships. His anger, avoidance of personal conversations, and resistance to change present his emotional distance, while his interactions with Marisol and Tommy show opportunities for social connection. Through these scenes, *A Man Called Otto* portrays loneliness as an experience connected to emotional conflict and interpersonal relationships. Freud's psychoanalytic perspective helps interpret these representations while keeping the analysis grounded in the film's dialogue, actions, and narrative context.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *A Man Called Otto* (2022) represents defensive behaviors in relation to loneliness through the characterization of Otto Anderson. Throughout the film, Otto is presented as a character who experiences emotional struggles after the death of his wife, Sonya. His anger, avoidance of emotional conversations, and resistance to changes in his life become important aspects of his characterization. These behaviors are shown through his dialogue, actions, and responses to other characters. Through these elements, the film presents how Otto deals with emotional pain and loneliness following the loss of someone important in his life.

The first finding shows that Otto's anger is one of the ways his emotional frustration is represented. His reactions to ordinary situations, including his interaction with the employee at the hardware store, show how his frustration becomes visible through his words and actions. However, his anger should not be understood separately from the narrative context. The film presents this behavior alongside his personal loss and difficulties in adjusting to life without Sonya. This representation allows viewers to understand Otto's character beyond his strict and unfriendly appearance.

The second and third findings show Otto's tendency to avoid emotionally sensitive conversations and his reluctance to accept changes after Sonya's death. When Marisol asks about his past with Sonya, Otto avoids discussing the subject. Similarly, when Marisol suggests removing Sonya's belongings, Otto expresses that he does not want to move on. These moments reveal his difficulty in facing emotional situations connected to his loss. His responses demonstrate how loneliness and emotional pain are represented through his communication and decisions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, these behaviors can be interpreted through the concept of defensive responses, as long as their interpretation remains connected to the context of the scenes.

Furthermore, the film shows that Otto's relationships with other characters gradually influence the development of his characterization. His interactions with Marisol and Tommy become important parts of the narrative because they create opportunities for him to reconnect with other

people. At first, Otto keeps his distance from his neighbors and prefers to manage his life independently. However, he gradually becomes more willing to communicate, help others, and accept their presence. These changes show that his loneliness is not represented only through isolation but also through the development of his social relationships. The film uses these interactions to present a gradual change in Otto's character.

From an English Literature perspective, this study demonstrates that psychoanalytic criticism can be used to interpret the representation of emotional conflict and defensive behaviors in film through characterization and narrative elements. Freud's psychoanalytic perspective, supported by Anna Freud's explanation of defense mechanisms, provides a framework for understanding Otto's responses to emotional difficulties. The analysis does not treat Otto as a real person or provide a psychological diagnosis. Instead, it examines how his behaviors are constructed and presented through dialogue, actions, and interactions within the film. Therefore, this study highlights how *A Man Called Otto* represents loneliness and defensive behaviors as important aspects of character development. It also shows that the relationship between a character's emotional struggles and social interactions can be explored through literary and film analysis.

This study is limited to four scenes or scene sequences from a single film and to a textual reading of the film. Further studies could analyze more scenes, compare the film with the novel on which it is based (Dzakir & Chandrabuwono, 2024), or examine how audiences respond to Otto's defensive behaviors and loneliness.

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Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. The researchers ensured the confidentiality of participants' information and maintained their anonymity throughout the study.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively to support language editing and improve manuscript clarity. The researchers independently conducted all data analysis, interpretation, and formulation of the conclusions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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