



Channeling Pain: Sublimation and Psychological Growth in Hinton's *The Outsider*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* through psychoanalytic analysis by employing Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis as an analytical framework. This study discusses the manifestation and use of defense mechanisms—repression, denial, and sublimation—by Ponyboy as coping strategies for grief and trauma. Qualitative textual analysis is employed to examine the phenomena of repression, denial, and sublimation exhibited in Ponyboy's behavior to manage trauma and grief following Johnny's death. The study reveals how Ponyboy's psychological defenses enable him to transform emotional pain into creative expression and personal growth. By positioning the novel within a Freudian framework, the study offers a deeper understanding of adolescent coping mechanisms and emotional resilience in literature.



Introduction

Contemporary young adult literature realistically depicts adolescent struggles such as identity formation, emotional volatility, and social disruption. S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) remains a flagship text in this landscape by portraying the hidden psychological wounds and trauma experienced by young adults. The text embodies the adolescent caught between survival expectations and unprocessed internal conflict. As young adult fiction, *The Outsiders* opens a window to the world of adolescents striving for identity, combating trauma and conflicts, and finding ways to emerge from chaos as authentic beings.

The novel has been studied through sociological and class-based lenses, yet its psychological depth remains underexplored. To understand the psychological nuances of Ponyboy's emotional responses as structured psychodynamic patterns shaped by cumulative trauma, this study applies a Freudian framework. This approach helps illuminate how literary characters can model psychological processes that resonate with real adolescent experiences, especially in high-risk environments. The behavior of Ponyboy Curtis, the protagonist of *The Outsiders*, consistently aligns with Freudian defense mechanisms that allow him to minimize emotional overload. These defense mechanisms—repression, denial, and sublimation—function as real-time strategies that Ponyboy unconsciously deploys to contain trauma, grief, and chronic stress.

This paper interprets these mechanisms through the Freudian framework to examine how defense mechanisms work as coping strategies to deal with pain, trauma, and loss.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze the manifestation of denial and repression in the character of Ponyboy after Johnny's death in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*.
2. To study the process of sublimation in Ponyboy as a coping mechanism.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalysis

According to the American Psychological Association, psychoanalysis is a technique or method used to treat mental disorders and conditions. It is a therapy that attempts to identify the root of problems by listening to and analyzing people's speech, memories, fears, dreams, desires, and feelings about relationships. Psychoanalysis aims to understand the structure and functioning of the id, ego, and superego and their interactions with each other and the outside world to understand and address mental and emotional conflicts. Analysis examines the ego, id, and superego in relation to their contents, boundaries, functions, dependencies on the outside world, and transformations (Freud, A., 1993).

Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, encompassing his concepts of id, ego, and superego, the dynamics of conscious and unconscious mind, and the process of ego defense mechanisms, has greatly influenced psychology and psychoanalytic therapy. Freud was the first to recognize and propose that patients' psychological disturbance symptoms often stem from inner conflict and struggle. The disturbance arises from internal conflicts between instinctual desires and societal and moral constraints. These clashes and tensions manifest through verbal and nonverbal expressions such as behavior, emotional signals, and dreams (Storck, 2015).

Id, Ego, and Superego

The id represents the unconscious part of the mind, driven by instinct and desire for pleasure. The ego, which operates on a more conscious or preconscious level, is the rational part that works as a mediator between the id and the demands of the outside world. The superego, the moralistic part, is shaped by societal and parental standards. When conflicts between the id, ego, and superego arise that the ego cannot handle, a sense of fear and danger is generated and pushed into the unconscious (Storck, 2015). At this point, the mind develops defense mechanisms as ways to cope with inner conflict.

Defense Mechanisms

The term "defense mechanism" first appeared in 1894 in Sigmund Freud's "The Neuropsychoses of Defense" (Freud, A., 1993). Anna Freud (1936), his daughter, further elaborated on Freud's concept of defense mechanisms and classified these mechanisms, including repression, denial, projection, and sublimation. The constant struggle among id, ego, and superego generates anxiety and conflicts that are controlled by distorting or rejecting reality or by repressing or blocking unacceptable impulses from entering consciousness. Defense mechanisms are essentially the ego's struggles against these impulses and conflicts (Freud, A., 1993).

Defense mechanisms aim to protect the person from excessive anxiety, negative affect, conflict, or loss of self-esteem by pushing threatening content from consciousness to the unconscious (Cramer, 2015). Defense mechanisms such as repression, denial, displacement, and sublimation operate unconsciously to protect the individual from emotional pain and conflict (Freud, A., 1993).

Repression

When the mind refuses to accept or confront trauma and its impact, repression as an active tool of defense mechanism starts operating by forcing threatening impulses into the unconscious (Storck, 2015). Repression involves the forcible inhibition of threatening impulses or memories from reaching consciousness. Repression deals with inward impulses and attempts to eliminate instinctual derivatives from reaching consciousness. Repression can be considered one of the defense mechanisms or part of all other defenses. However, the inefficacy of repression—when instinctual impulses keep surfacing to consciousness and attempt to influence behavior—gives rise to other defenses (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Freud, A., 1993). Other common defenses include denial, displacement, sublimation, reaction formation, isolation, and regression.

Denial

Denial simply means the rejection of external reality (Storck, 2015). Denial is used when someone encounters an upsetting, harsh, or painful situation or impulses that are unavoidable by reversing, inverting, or rejecting reality altogether. In denial, the ego defends and protects itself against external stimuli. Thus, simply avoiding or rejecting an unpleasant occasion is called denial (Freud, A., 1993). Denial, being the least complex defense mechanism, is usually found in young children (Cramer, 2015). In conditions of extreme stress from which there is no escape, denial is the most adaptive defense (Cramer, 2015).

Sublimation

Sublimation is a process of diverting or redirecting instinctual aims—such as anxiety or aggression—toward socially acceptable values. Sublimation can be termed as displacement of instinctual aims (Freud, A., 1993). It represents the most adaptive cognitive defense to cope with emotional burdens by transforming trauma into creative or moral purpose.

Literature Review

The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton (1967) revolutionized and influenced young adult fiction. Hinton wrote her first novel when she was only sixteen, focusing on the social dynamics of young adults and exposing the complex social and emotional realities of adolescence, particularly the struggles that take place behind the facade of ordinary school life. The novel deals with class, social, and emotional conflicts faced by teenagers. As Hinton stated in the *New York Times*, "Teenagers are real people with real problems" (Hinton, 1967), suggesting teenagers' struggles to find their place and role in the world and emphasizing the authenticity of adolescent experience and emotional depth. The novel opens a window into the world of young adults, witnessing teenagers' struggles to

seek identity, belonging, and purpose in a divided society, capturing the rawness and emotional vulnerability of youth in transition (Done et al., 2012).

Numerous scholars have approached the novel to explore adolescent identity and conflict from different critical perspectives. Kisulu (2022) examines the use of symbolism in *The Outsiders*, arguing that symbols are relative and hold meanings that extend beyond their surface or connotative meanings. Similarly, Anne (2018) discusses the meaning transformation of the word "gold" from Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" to the phrase "stay gold" in *The Outsiders*. Farrington (2018) explores how Hinton's teenage characters challenge and reject societal orthodoxy in pursuit of their genuine self-identity. Izzaturrohman (2015) focuses on Johnny Cade's life and his journey to overcome feelings of inferiority. Borbaš (2022) explores how the novel represents issues of social class and injustice. Letellier (2019) conducts a comparative study of queer relationship representation in three novels, including *The Outsiders*.

While these studies demonstrate various thematic and social dimensional approaches to the novel, a psychoanalytic approach has not been undertaken to understand characters' inner worlds and turmoil. A psychoanalytic reading of the novel offers fresh insight into these young characters, revealing how their behavior and decisions are rooted in unconscious and emotional conflicts. Freud's concept of defense mechanisms provides a framework to examine how these teenagers navigate their vulnerability and strive for survival.

The study of how people emotionally and psychologically protect themselves is rooted in classical psychoanalysis. The structural model of the psyche suggests that our mind uses unconscious strategies called defense mechanisms deployed by the ego to resolve conflicts among the id's impulses, the superego's demands, and external reality (Freud, 1923). Anna Freud further expanded this concept in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1937/1993), laying out a structured framework for defense mechanisms and classifications such as denial, repression, displacement, projection, sublimation, and rationalization.

Defenses are not merely pathological markers; they are adaptive psychological strategies, especially in childhood and adolescence. Defenses are part of normal development. Different defenses emerge at different developmental periods. Teenagers facing chronic stress, instability, or trauma exhibit predictable defensive patterns such as denial and projection in early stages, with the possibility of sublimation and intellectualization as the person attains maturity (Cramer, 2015). Not recognizing reality can result in self-injurious behavior (Cramer, 2015). When reality becomes too dangerous or harsh, unresolved trauma increases dependence on defenses like denial, avoidance, and repression (Storck, 2015).

A person's psychic growth involves facing and resolving various conflicts. When these conflicts are not resolved, they cause trauma and psychological distress, resulting in low self-esteem and anxiety (Storck, 2015). Freud identified two forms of anxiety. First, traumatic anxiety occurs when the psyche is overwhelmed with more stimulation than it can manage. Second, neurotic anxiety develops when the mind anticipates a repeat of such situations, triggering defensive operations to avoid them. This is the emotional response rooted in the original sense of helplessness felt during a traumatic event (Storck, 2015). When someone experiences trauma, talking about the experience, rebuilding connections with others, and gaining clarity about internal processes helps cope with trauma and pain (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research method. The approach of close textual analysis is used to conduct this study. Psychoanalytic interpretation provides different ways to interpret texts and

examine the internal worlds of characters. Through this psychoanalytic approach, the phenomena of defense mechanisms in Ponyboy's actions and behavior in *The Outsiders* are studied. Freudian psychoanalytic theory is suitable to guide the research and to understand Ponyboy's behavior and actions in light of defense mechanisms. Furthermore, it helps understand how Ponyboy tackles trauma and grief through these defenses.

Though these defenses are used by other characters, especially Dallas (Dally) Winston, the study of Ponyboy Curtis provides the journey of an innocent dreamer to a resilient survivor. The primary source, *The Outsiders* by Susan Eloise Hinton, is closely read and then analyzed through the Freudian concept of defense mechanisms, specifically denial, repression, and sublimation. Through close reading, behaviors and actions showcasing defense mechanisms are identified and interpreted in scenes and dialogues involving Ponyboy that reflect his socio-cultural struggles.

Textual Analysis

Defense Mechanisms in Ponyboy

Traumatic experiences leave traces on mind and emotion and haunt people after traumatic events (Van der Kolk, 2014). When adolescent trauma collides with limited emotional resources, defense mechanisms operate as survival architecture. Defense strategies either stabilize a fragile psyche or threaten its integrity.

This section analyzes the emotional and behavioral patterns of Ponyboy Curtis through Freud's theory of defense mechanisms—particularly denial, repression, and sublimation. Freud explained defense mechanisms as strategies of the individual's unconscious to protect the ego from conflict and pain. This study illuminates how Ponyboy's character in *The Outsiders* deals with trauma and pain. His defenses lean toward cognitive restructuring and emotional sublimation.

Denial, Repression, and Trauma

Repression is an unconscious attempt to push distressing thoughts, emotions, and memories into the unconscious mind to avoid conflict and psychological pain. Denial is the refusal of painful reality to escape emotional distress. From a Freudian viewpoint, denial can be interpreted as the ego's execution of defense mechanisms to prevent Ponyboy from overwhelming traumatic anxiety.

The protagonist uses repression and denial as primary defense mechanisms to cope with his friend's death and the trauma of murder. The acceptance of his friend's death is too painful, so to avoid that trauma, instead of accepting Johnny's death, he convinces himself that Johnny is alive and was not involved in Bob's killing. In Chapter 10, he repeatedly tries to convince himself that his friend is not dead. This denial acts as a shield to safeguard his vulnerable self-concept while experiencing intense grief.

"Johnny is not dead" (Hinton, 1967, Chapter 10, p. 128).

When humans feel threatened, they call out for help or support. Failing to receive help results in activating fight-or-flight mode and then freezing or collapsing (Van der Kolk, 2014). The trauma of his friend's death makes him numb. After leaving the hospital, Ponyboy stumbles around, becoming numb and clueless about what is happening. It is difficult for Ponyboy to accept this reality, and he fails. Upon reaching home and announcing his friend's death, his voice shakes, and an internal voice denies this reality. He is frightened and trembling as his friend's death makes him hysterical and numb. When Dally encounters police and is shot, this additional painful incident makes him completely shut down. These painful experiences, occurring one after another, cause him to collapse.

"My stomach gave a violent start and turned into a hunk of ice. The world was spinning around me,... and I felt myself swaying on my feet" (Hinton, 1967, Chapter 10, p. 132).

This emotional conflict and trauma generate defense mechanisms: denial and repression. He tries not only to reject his thoughts but also to suppress the reality that Johnny has died and that Johnny had killed one of the Socs. His repeated denial of Johnny's death and Bob's murder, and repression of these memories, work as temporary shields to keep him away from unbearable pain. Consequently, he attempts to deny his friend's death and Bob's murder by Johnny and represses his memories. This denial and repression function as protective shields against trauma and loss. He continues attempting to repress his feelings of threat that he might lose his brothers as the court has summoned them.

However, his continuous attempt to repress problematic memories to protect himself fails. Trauma is not just an event but an imprint that leaves its mark on the mind and haunts the person until addressed (Van der Kolk, 2014). These memories and impulses keep surfacing to consciousness, evident in his continual denial of reality. His denial and repression are at work when he refuses to accept Johnny as a murderer, repressing the horrors of Bob's death, Johnny's condition in the hospital, and the threat of losing his brothers.

Sublimation

Human beings belong to an extremely resilient and remarkable species. They have the ability to rebound from emotional overload, pain, and the horrors of wars, disasters, violence, and betrayal (Van der Kolk, 2014). The most adaptive cognitive defense to cope with emotional burdens is sublimation, which transforms trauma into creative or moral purpose. Trauma victims find language helpful in coping with and fighting trauma and pain. Language offers the power to heal and change by enabling communication. This communication through language helps trauma survivors find meaning and face reality.

When repression and denial fail to protect, Ponyboy faces the real world and attempts to process his trauma through analysis, reflection, and acceptance, ultimately overcoming his conflict and trauma.

I still didn't want to do my homework that night, though... Finally, I picked up *Gone with the Wind* and looked at it for a long time. I knew Johnny was dead. I had known it all the time, even while I was sick and pretending he wasn't. It was Johnny, not me, who had killed Bob—I knew that too. I had just thought that maybe if I played like Johnny wasn't dead it wouldn't hurt so much. (Hinton, 1967, Chapter 12, p. 151)

Ponyboy first denies and represses his traumatic memories but fails and realizes there is no way to avoid acceptance. Ultimately, Ponyboy accepts reality. After this acceptance, he understands and learns to channel his impulses and grief. Finally, Ponyboy finds a way to channel his trauma into creativity. He now understands the trauma and pain he is experiencing and can address it by communicating. When Ponyboy's teacher assigns him homework requiring him to write something original and authentic, after struggling, he finally decides to share his and Johnny's story, their struggle, and their perspective with the world. His homework, this very essay, becomes the story of the novel.

"It was too vast a problem to be just a personal thing... Someone should tell their side of the story,... And I decided I could tell people... maybe they could understand... And I finally began like this: When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only

two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home..." (Hinton, 1967, Chapter 12, pp. 152-153).

Eventually, Ponyboy Curtis finds a way to channel all his negative feelings and impulses toward positive and constructive activity. Ponyboy survives because his defenses are flexible and cognitive. He uses his cognition and strength—his writing—to thrive in this chaotic world. Through sublimation, he transforms unbearable emotional pain into creative expression, demonstrating the healing power of artistic creation and narrative construction.

This transformation represents the culmination of Ponyboy's psychological journey. Where denial and repression served as temporary shields against overwhelming grief, sublimation provides a sustainable path forward. By writing his story, Ponyboy not only processes his own trauma but also creates meaning from his experiences. He honors Johnny's memory not through continued denial but through authentic representation of their shared struggle. This creative act allows him to integrate his traumatic experiences into his identity rather than remaining fragmented by them.

The act of writing itself becomes therapeutic. As Van der Kolk (2014) notes, trauma survivors need to find language for their experiences to heal. Ponyboy's decision to write reflects his growing emotional maturity and his ability to employ more sophisticated defense mechanisms. Rather than avoiding or repressing his pain, he confronts it directly through narrative, transforming private suffering into shared understanding. This shift from primitive defenses (denial and repression) to mature defenses (sublimation) marks his psychological growth and resilience.

Moreover, Ponyboy's sublimation serves a social function beyond personal healing. By deciding that "someone should tell their side of the story," he recognizes that his trauma is connected to larger social issues. His writing becomes an act of advocacy, giving voice to marginalized youth like himself and Johnny. This connection between personal trauma and social consciousness demonstrates how sublimation can channel individual pain into collective meaning and social awareness.

Conclusion

The Outsiders by Susan Eloise Hinton is one of the influential works of young adult literature. This novel changed the perception of young adult literature by presenting a more realistic picture of adolescents struggling to grapple with reality and trying to find their position in a harsh world. This study answers how defense mechanisms manifest in Ponyboy's actions and dialogues and help him survive trauma and pain. The emotional structure of *The Outsiders* is built upon the defense mechanisms its characters employ to cope with their environment. Through the lens of Freud's psychoanalytic theory—specifically defense mechanisms—we gain a clear understanding of the protagonist Ponyboy's actions and behaviors.

The analysis demonstrates that anxiety and instinctual impulses, if carefully observed and redirected, can lead to positive outcomes. It shows how Ponyboy relies on psychological armor to stabilize the ego while dealing with overwhelming loss. Ponyboy channels his anxiety and pain into more socially acceptable action by channeling his pain and grief into writing—the homework assigned by his English teacher. Thus, the novel functions as a powerful tool to reflect the complexities of emotional trauma and its effects on individuals.

This study deepens our understanding of defense mechanisms, their manifestation, and the channeling of negative impulses into constructive outlets. The progression from primitive defenses (denial and repression) to mature defenses (sublimation) illustrates the potential for psychological growth even in the midst of severe trauma. Ponyboy's journey demonstrates that while initial

defensive responses may be necessary for survival, lasting healing requires confronting reality and finding creative ways to integrate painful experiences.

The findings carry strategic implications for how we understand adolescent psychology in literature and, by extension, in real-world contexts. Young people facing trauma often employ similar defensive patterns, and understanding these mechanisms can inform therapeutic interventions and educational approaches. Literature like *The Outsiders* provides valuable models for how adolescents can navigate trauma, offering hope that resilience and growth are possible even after devastating losses.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of creative expression as a healing modality for traumatized youth. Ponyboy's transformation through writing suggests that providing adolescents with opportunities for artistic and narrative expression can facilitate psychological processing and recovery. His story validates the experiences of young people dealing with violence, loss, and social marginalization while demonstrating that these experiences, though painful, need not define one's entire future.

This research primarily focused on Ponyboy; however, there are underutilized aspects that could be explored in future studies. For instance, the defense mechanisms of Dally Winston and how his defenses led to destruction warrant investigation. A comparative study examining how defense mechanisms play roles in Ponyboy Curtis's survival versus Dally Winston's death would provide valuable insights into adaptive versus maladaptive coping strategies. Moreover, future research could extend to studying attachment styles and inter-group aggression between Greasers and Socs, further enriching our understanding of the psychological dimensions of *The Outsiders*.

Additionally, future studies might explore how other characters in the novel employ defense mechanisms, examining the collective psychological landscape of the Greaser gang. Comparative analyses across different young adult literature texts could reveal common patterns in how adolescent characters cope with trauma. Research could also investigate how readers—particularly young adult readers—respond to and potentially internalize the defense mechanisms modeled by literary characters, examining the therapeutic or cautionary effects of such narratives.

In conclusion, this psychoanalytic reading of *The Outsiders* reveals the novel's profound psychological depth and its relevance to understanding adolescent trauma and resilience. By examining Ponyboy's defense mechanisms through a Freudian lens, we gain insight into the complex interplay between psychological survival and personal growth. The novel ultimately affirms the human capacity for resilience and transformation, demonstrating that even in the face of devastating loss, individuals can find pathways to healing through creative expression and the courage to confront painful realities.

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