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Hidden Fears and Defense Mechanisms of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley in William Makepeace Thackeray's Vanity Fair

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Abstract: This study examines the hidden fears and defense mechanisms of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The objective of this study is to identify the hidden fears experienced by the two main characters, analyze the defense mechanism that employ, and explain how these psychological factors influence their relationship and life decisions. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method and applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concepts of anxiety and defense mechanisms. The data were collected from the novel *Vanity Fair* and analyzed through textual interpretation of the characters' thoughts, actions, and interactions. The findings reveal that Becky Sharp's Hidden fears remain associated with poverty, social rejection, loss of status, and emotional vulnerability. To cope with these fears, she employs defense mechanisms such as rationalization, denial, projection, repression, and reaction formation. Meanwhile, Amelia Sedley's hidden fears are related to abandonment, emotional loss, insecurity, and fear of disappointment. Her defense mechanisms include repression, denial, idealization, and displacement. These defense mechanisms influence the characters' behavior, relationship important life decisions throughout the novel. The study concludes that hidden fears play a significant role in shaping the psychological development of both characters and contribute to the progression of the narrative.

Keywords: Hidden Fears, Defense Mechanism, Becky Sharp, Amelia Sedley, *Vanity Fair*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji ketakutan tersembunyi (*hidden fears*) dan mekanisme pertahanan diri (*defense mechanisms*) yang dialami oleh Becky Sharp dan Amelia Sedley dalam novel *Vanity Fair* karya William Makepeace Thackeray. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah mengidentifikasi ketakutan tersembunyi yang dialami oleh kedua tokoh utama, menganalisis mekanisme pertahanan diri yang mereka gunakan, serta menjelaskan bagaimana faktor-faktor psikologis tersebut memengaruhi hubungan dan keputusan hidup mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan menerapkan teori psikoanalisis Sigmund Freud, khususnya konsep kecemasan (*anxiety*) dan mekanisme pertahanan diri (*defense mechanisms*). Data diperoleh dari novel *Vanity Fair* dan dianalisis melalui interpretasi tekstual terhadap pikiran, tindakan, dan interaksi para tokohnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketakutan tersembunyi Becky Sharp berkaitan dengan kemiskinan,

*penolakan sosial, kehilangan status, dan kerentanan emosional. Untuk mengatasi ketakutan tersebut, ia menggunakan berbagai mekanisme pertahanan diri, seperti rasionalisasi, penyangkalan (denial), proyeksi, represi, dan pembentukan reaksi (reaction formation). Sementara itu, ketakutan tersembunyi Amelia Sedley berkaitan dengan rasa ditinggalkan, kehilangan emosional, rasa tidak aman, dan ketakutan akan kekecewaan. Mekanisme pertahanan diri yang digunakannya meliputi represi, penyangkalan (denial), idealisasi, dan pengalihan (displacement). Berbagai mekanisme pertahanan diri tersebut memengaruhi perilaku, hubungan interpersonal, serta keputusan-keputusan penting yang diambil oleh kedua tokoh sepanjang alur cerita. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ketakutan tersembunyi memiliki peran yang signifikan dalam membentuk perkembangan psikologis Becky Sharp dan Amelia Sedley serta berkontribusi terhadap perkembangan alur naratif dalam novel *Vanity Fair*.*

Kata Kunci: *Ketakutan Tersembunyi, Mekanisme Pertahanan Diri, Becky Sharp, Amelia Sedley, Vanity Fair*

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as its core research text. This novel, set in the 19th-century Victorian era against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, serves as the core foundational text for the full analysis carried out in this study. This research focuses on the novel's two central protagonists, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, to deeply explore the core themes of ambition, social climbing, and moral hypocrisy embodied by the two characters. The 19th-century British societal trend of revering social status, wealth, and outward appearance, as depicted in the novel, remains persistent in the contemporary social media context, which forms the core contemporary relevance of this research. The value of this study lies in analyzing the strategies the two protagonists adopt to navigate social pressure and achieve their personal goals. Within the framework of existing research, past academic studies of *Vanity Fair* have mostly approached the work from psychological, feminist, and sociocultural perspectives, with long-term focus on the Victorian moral context and the novel's satirical techniques. It is only in recent years that scholars have gradually introduced Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory to conduct related discussions.

Among existing studies, Capuano (2008) some examine Becky Sharp's manipulative behaviour as a form of negotiating power and social control in Victorian society, Zhang (2017) and others interpret Becky's quest for identity as a struggle to gain recognition and social status, employing a psychoanalytic approach. Moya (2011), highlight Becky's Sharp as a figure who challenges traditional concepts of feminism and embodies issues regarding identity and gender roles. These studies have made significant contributions to the analysis of *Vanity Fair* from symbolic, feminist, and identity-based perspectives. However, scholarly attention regarding the unconscious psychological process specially hidden fears and ego defense mechanisms that influence the behaviour of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, remains relatively limited.

To address this gap, the study employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, especially the concept of the id, ego, and superego as outlined in *The Ego and The Id* (1923/1961) and Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms from *The Ego and the Mechanism of Defense* (1936). Utilizing this theoretical framework, the study aims to explain how hidden fears influence the behaviour of the two protagonists and how ego defense mechanisms are employed in response to internal conflict and social pressure. Consequently, this research seeks to provide a deeper psychological interpretation of *Vanity Fair* while complementing previous studies.

This study takes the two core protagonists of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, as its research subjects. Its core goal is to explore the two characters' implicit psychological fears and defense mechanisms, as well as how these unconscious processes shape their social and emotional survival strategies. This study selects core dialogues, narrative descriptions, character interactions, and key social scenarios from the novel's full text as its primary analytical corpus. It adopts qualitative literary research methods, with close reading and comparative character analysis as its core tools. The study compares the similarities and differences in the two protagonists' behaviors when facing the contemporary social stigma and gender expectations of their era, and develops a systematic interpretation grounded in core concepts of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, including defense mechanisms, repression, and unconscious desire. The study finds that Becky's outward confidence and social manipulation are defensive measures to conceal her inner insecurity, birth-based class stigma, and fragmented identity; an unresolvable sense of emotional emptiness constantly persists behind her social achievements. For Amelia, who appears as the Victorian-era "angel in the house", her emotional self-sacrifice and long-term dependence on male figures are not marks of innate moral superiority. Rather, they are psychological repression and emotional passivity formed under the pressure of social discipline. This study verifies that *Vanity Fair* can function as a psychological case study of classic literature. It not only deepens understanding of the core class and gender critiques at the heart of Thackeray's original work, but also confirms the contemporary relevance of this novel's engagement with issues of identity construction, emotional self-defence, and social survival (Anwar, 2018).

Research on ego defense mechanisms has been widely conducted in literary studies using psychoanalytic approaches, particularly Sigmund Freud's theory. Previous studies have examined how psychological conflict and anxiety influence literary characters' behavior, although they differ in terms of research focus, literary works, and analytical scope. Three previous studies are particularly relevant to the present research.

Palarani & Hadiyanto (2022) analyzed the psychoanalytic conflict, anxiety, and ego defense mechanisms of Aza Holmes using Freud's theory. Their findings showed that the protagonist employed projection, fixation, and displacement to cope with anxiety. However, the study focused on a single protagonist and did not examine hidden fears as the underlying source of the character's psychological responses. Similarly, Syahidah & Laksono (2021) found that the protagonist utilized repression, denial, regression, displacement, and intellectualization to respond to psychological conflict and traumatic experiences, but their analysis centered on one character without emphasizing hidden fears.

Kaya (2021) Investigated ego defense mechanisms in two literary works using the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud. The study demonstrated that psychological conflict influenced the characters' use of various defense mechanisms, yet it primarily identified the defense mechanisms themselves and did not explore hidden fears or focus on characters from Victorian social novels.

Based on these previous studies, a clear research gap remains. Earlier research primarily emphasized anxiety or psychological conflict and generally examined a single protagonist. In contrast, the present study compares two female protagonists, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, to investigate how hidden fears shape their personalities, behavior, and ego defense mechanisms. By integrating Sigmund Freud's theories of personality structure and anxiety with Anna Freud's theory of ego defense mechanisms, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics of both characters.

This study conducts a psychoanalytic investigation of the two protagonists Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Its objectives are to uncover the characters' hidden fears and defense mechanisms, reveal the impact of unconscious emotions on the characters' behaviors and interpersonal relationships, deepen interpretations

of the characters, and highlight the universality of the psychological struggles presented in this literary work. The core conclusion of this study holds that *Vanity Fair*, set within the framework of Victorian society, can be analysed as a representative psychological case; three factors unconscious fears, defense mechanisms, and unattainable social ideals jointly shape and constrain the characters' actions. The line of psychoanalytic theory supporting this study has a clear context: Sigmund Freud, in his 1915 work *Repression and The Ego and the Id* (drafted in 1923 and published in 1961), proposed that the ego mediates between the id and the superego to manage internal conflicts through mechanisms such as repression and denial (S. Freud, 1961). Anna Freud's 1936 work *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* systematically organizes additional defense strategies including reaction formation, supplementing the logic for regulating unconscious psychological distress.

METHODS

This study takes the psychological elements of the characters Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley from the novel *Vanity Fair* as its core research objects. It carries out research using qualitative description, literary analysis, and close reading, and builds its analytical framework based on core psychoanalytic theories: first, the internal conflict theory of the id, ego, and superego proposed by Sigmund Freud in his 1923 work *The Ego and the Id*; second, the four defense mechanisms of repression, denial, reaction formation, and sublimation sorted out by Anna Freud in her 1936 work *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. Anna Freud defined these as unconscious strategies the ego adopts to protect individuals from anxiety and internal conflict. This study interprets the characters' psychological motivations and emotional struggles by sorting through their behaviors, dialogues, thoughts, and the text's narrative descriptions, frames Becky's manipulative social strategies and Amelia's emotional passivity as exclusive defense strategies adapted to their respective traits, and ultimately forms a more refined, theory-supported psychological interpretation of the novel.

The study was conducted through four systematic stages. First, the researcher carefully read the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, plot development, and characterization. Second, relevant passages containing indications of the characters' hidden fears, emotional struggles, and defense mechanisms were identified and selected as the primary data for analysis. Third, the selected data were analyzed using psychoanalytic concepts, particularly those proposed by Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud, to uncover the underlying psychological conflicts experienced by the main characters. Finally, the findings were interpreted to explain how the identified defense mechanisms influenced the characters' behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and major life decisions throughout the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hidden Fears of the Main Characters in *Vanity Fair*

The psychoanalytic analysis demonstrates that the behavioral differences between Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley originate from fundamentally different unconscious fears rather than contrasting moral qualities. Previous literary criticism has generally positioned Becky as an ambitious opportunist and Amelia as the embodiment of Victorian femininity. However, the findings of this study indicate that both characters are primarily motivated by anxiety that operates beneath conscious awareness. In Freud's (1961) theory, anxiety functions as a signal that alerts the ego to perceived threats arising from external reality, internal conflict, or the possibility of losing emotional security. Consequently, the actions of both protagonists should be understood as adaptive psychological responses intended to reduce anxiety rather than as purely deliberate moral choices. This interpretation shifts the analytical focus from ethical judgment toward the psychological processes that shape personality development

throughout the novel. Contemporary psychological research suggests that defense mechanisms function as adaptive regulatory processes that protect personality functioning by reducing emotional distress and maintaining ego stability, although excessive reliance on these mechanisms may distort reality and impair interpersonal functioning (Sarrar & Goth, 2022). Likewise, recent studies in moral psychology argue that human behavior is more accurately explained by the underlying motives and psychological processes that drive decision-making than by observable actions alone, indicating that moral judgments are strongly influenced by inferred intentions rather than overt behavior (Carlson et al., 2022). This interpretation therefore shifts the analytical focus from ethical judgment toward the psychological processes that shape personality development throughout the novel, allowing Becky and Amelia to be understood as psychologically complex individuals whose decisions reflect unconscious efforts to cope with anxiety rather than merely conscious moral choices.

The findings reveal that Becky Sharp's dominant hidden fears are associated with poverty, social insignificance, dependence, emotional vulnerability, and the possibility of being exposed as someone who does not belong to the upper social class. Growing up without family protection or financial stability places Becky in a continuous state of reality anxiety. Rather than perceiving wealth merely as material success, she unconsciously equates economic security with personal dignity, autonomy, and survival. This interpretation is illustrated in the early episode when Becky throws Johnson's *Dictionary* out of the carriage after leaving Miss Pinkerton's academy:

"But, lo! And just at the coach drove off, Miss Sharp put her pale face out of the window and actually flung the book back into the garden" (Thackeray, Ch. I).

Although the episode has often been interpreted simply as an act of rebellion, the present findings suggest that it symbolically rejects a social system in which education alone cannot overcome structural inequality. Becky instinctively recognizes that knowledge without economic power offers little protection within Victorian society. Consequently, her rejection of the dictionary represents a rejection of powerlessness rather than a rejection of learning itself. This scene symbolically reflects Becky's awareness that intellectual ability alone cannot overcome structural inequalities when opportunities are constrained by socioeconomic background. Recent studies on educational inequality similarly argue that although education is commonly regarded as a pathway to upward mobility, its effectiveness is often limited by unequal access to economic, cultural, and social capital, which continue to reproduce existing class structures across generations (Blanden et al., 2023; Cunningham, 2024).

The psychological significance of financial security becomes even more explicit when Becky declares, *"I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year"* (Thackeray, Ch. IX). Rather than expressing excessive materialism, the statement reveals an unconscious belief that money provides protection from humiliation, dependence, and social exclusion. This finding supports Freud's notion that reality anxiety originates from genuine external threats rather than irrational fear. Becky therefore pursues wealth because it represents psychological safety. Her ambition is not an independent personality trait but a defensive response to persistent insecurity. This interpretation extends Capuano's (2008) discussion of Becky by suggesting that her ambition originates less from moral corruption than from unresolved socioeconomic anxiety that continually threatens her sense of identity.

The findings further indicate that Becky's fear is not limited to poverty but also encompasses emotional dependence and social rejection. Throughout the novel she carefully constructs multiple social identities, adapting her speech and behavior according to the expectations of different social circles. Thackeray observes that Becky *"could be genteel with the genteel, witty with the witty"* (Thackeray, Ch. XIII), demonstrating her remarkable capacity for social adaptation. Rather than reflecting simple opportunism, this flexibility functions as a psychological defense against the possibility that her humble origins might be exposed. Becky

understands that social acceptance depends upon maintaining a carefully managed public identity. Consequently, authenticity becomes psychologically dangerous because revealing her true background may result in exclusion from the social world she struggles to enter. This finding corresponds with Syahidah & Laksono (2021), who argue that unresolved anxiety frequently manifests through defensive identity construction and adaptive social behavior.

Another important finding concerns Becky's fear of emotional vulnerability. Unlike traditional romantic heroines, Becky consistently treats emotional attachment as a potential threat because affection implies dependence and possible disappointment. Her response to Sir Pitt Crawley's marriage proposal illustrates this pattern. Although Becky appears emotionally distressed, the narrator subsequently reveals that her regret concerns the loss of financial opportunity rather than romantic affection. Similarly, after the birth of Rawdon, the narrator remarks that Becky "*was not a very tender mother, but she was a very careful one*" (Thackeray, Ch. XV). The distinction between tenderness and carefulness is psychologically significant because it demonstrates that Becky fulfills practical responsibilities while suppressing emotional intimacy. According to Anna Freud (1936), repression frequently develops when emotional expression threatens the stability of the ego. In Becky's case, emotional distance functions as a protective strategy that preserves autonomy but simultaneously reduces her capacity to establish genuine interpersonal relationships.

In contrast to Becky, Amelia Sedley's hidden fears originate primarily from emotional insecurity rather than socioeconomic instability. The findings indicate that Amelia's dominant anxieties involve abandonment, loneliness, emotional change, and self-reliance. Whereas Becky attempts to master external reality through ambition, Amelia attempts to preserve emotional security by maintaining attachment to significant others. Freud (1926) argued that separation anxiety emerges when important emotional bonds appear threatened, and Amelia consistently demonstrates this psychological pattern throughout the novel. Her identity is initially constructed around George Osborne, whom she loves unconditionally. Even before marriage, the narrator explains that Amelia "*loved him with all her little heart*" (Thackeray, Ch. V), indicating that her sense of self is deeply intertwined with the continuation of this relationship.

Amelia's fear becomes increasingly evident when George prepares to leave for war. Instead of encouraging him or expressing confidence, she desperately pleads, "*Oh, George, don't go... Don't leave me*" (Thackeray, Ch. XII). This reaction reflects more than ordinary sadness because it reveals the unconscious expectation that separation threatens her emotional existence. Even after George's death, the psychological attachment remains unchanged. Thackeray observes that Amelia "*had only one sentiment, and that was reverence for the dead*" (Thackeray, Ch. XLVI). Rather than processing grief and gradually rebuilding her life, Amelia transforms George into a permanent emotional ideal. This finding supports Freud's explanation that unresolved separation anxiety may inhibit adaptation by encouraging individuals to preserve psychological attachment long after external reality has changed.

The analysis also identifies Amelia's fear of emotional change and personal independence. Throughout the novel she repeatedly rejects opportunities for psychological growth because change introduces uncertainty. She preserves George's memory, refuses to acknowledge his imperfections, and hesitates to accept Dobbin's sincere affection despite his unwavering loyalty. Such behavior illustrates what Freud described as fixation, in which the ego remains attached to an earlier emotional stage because progressing beyond it generates overwhelming anxiety. This finding complements Sari's (2019) discussion of *Jane Eyre*, where emotional maturity develops through self-assertion. Amelia follows the opposite trajectory. Her persistent dependence provides temporary emotional comfort but delays the development of autonomy and self-determination. Consequently, her psychological security is maintained at the expense of personal growth.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley embody two contrasting psychological responses to anxiety within the same Victorian social environment. Becky externalizes fear through ambition, social adaptation, and emotional suppression, whereas Amelia internalizes fear through attachment, dependence, and resistance to change. Although their personalities appear fundamentally different, both characters employ unconscious strategies intended to preserve the stability of the ego. This comparative finding suggests that *Vanity Fair* should not be interpreted merely as a moral contrast between virtue and vice but rather as a psychological exploration of how hidden fears shape human behavior. Through Freud's theory of anxiety, Thackeray's protagonists emerge as psychologically coherent individuals whose decisions, relationships, and identities are governed by unconscious efforts to negotiate insecurity in a society structured by both social inequality and emotional uncertainty. This perspective is consistent with recent psychoanalytic scholarship, which argues that anxiety functions not simply as an emotional reaction but as an organizing force that influences identity formation, self-regulation, and interpersonal behavior through unconscious psychological processes (Corradi, 2023). Moreover, contemporary psychoanalytic studies emphasize that literary narratives provide valuable spaces for examining the interaction between unconscious motivation, identity construction, and social experience, allowing readers to understand characters as psychologically coherent subjects rather than as mere embodiments of ethical categories (Jesus, 2023).

Ego Defense Mechanisms of the Main Characters

The findings indicate that the hidden fears experienced by Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley do not remain merely as unconscious emotional states but are transformed into specific patterns of ego defense mechanisms that regulate their behavior throughout the novel. According to Anna Freud (1936), ego defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological strategies employed by the ego to reduce anxiety and maintain psychological stability when individuals encounter situations that threaten their emotional security. Rather than eliminating the source of anxiety, these mechanisms alter how reality is perceived, interpreted, or emotionally experienced. Consequently, the behaviors displayed by Becky and Amelia should not be understood solely as deliberate personal choices but also as manifestations of unconscious efforts to preserve internal equilibrium. The present findings reveal that although both protagonists experience anxiety, they rely on markedly different defense mechanisms that reflect the different sources of their hidden fears. Becky predominantly utilizes repression, rationalization, sublimation, projection, and denial to cope with socioeconomic insecurity, whereas Amelia relies on denial, idealization, reaction formation, displacement, and regression to preserve emotional attachment. These contrasting defensive patterns demonstrate that similar psychological needs for security may produce fundamentally different behavioral outcomes depending on the nature of the underlying anxiety. As a result, individuals experiencing comparable levels of anxiety may adopt different defensive strategies according to how they perceive and process internal and external threats, leading to distinct patterns of behavior and interpersonal functioning (Sarrar & Goth, 2022). Furthermore, large-scale empirical evidence indicates that immature, neurotic, and pathological defense mechanisms are associated with different levels of psychosocial functioning, demonstrating that the quality of defensive adaptation significantly influences social relationships, decision-making, and overall psychological adjustment (Giuseppe, 2023).

The findings demonstrate that repression constitutes the most prominent defense mechanism employed by Becky Sharp. Anna Freud (1936) defines repression as the unconscious exclusion of unacceptable emotions, desires, or memories from conscious awareness in order to protect the ego from psychological distress. Throughout *Vanity Fair*, Becky repeatedly suppresses emotions that might interfere with her pursuit of social

advancement, including affection, guilt, disappointment, and emotional dependence. Rather than openly expressing vulnerability, she consistently presents herself as confident, intelligent, and emotionally composed. This defensive pattern is particularly evident in her family relationships. After the birth of her son, the narrator remarks that Becky “*was not a very tender mother, but she was a very careful one*” (Thackeray, Ch. XV). The distinction between practical care and emotional tenderness indicates that Becky unconsciously suppresses maternal affection because emotional attachment represents vulnerability. Similarly, her interactions with Rawdon Crawley remain largely governed by practical considerations instead of emotional intimacy. These findings suggest that repression allows Becky to maintain autonomy and psychological control, although prolonged emotional suppression simultaneously diminishes her capacity for genuine interpersonal relationships. Thus, repression functions as both an adaptive and maladaptive strategy, protecting the ego while gradually restricting emotional development. However, recent empirical studies have shown that persistent emotional suppression often carries significant interpersonal costs because it reduces emotional responsiveness, limits authentic self-disclosure, and weakens perceptions of closeness within relationships (Sels et al., 2025). Furthermore, longitudinal evidence suggests that the psychological consequences of habitual suppression depend partly on individuals' sense of authenticity, with chronic inhibition of emotional expression being associated with poorer psychological adjustment and relational functioning over time (Xu et al., 2026).

Closely related to repression is Becky's extensive use of rationalization. Anna Freud explains that rationalization enables individuals to reinterpret morally questionable behavior in ways that reduce guilt and preserve a positive self-image. The findings reveal that Becky repeatedly justifies manipulation, deception, and strategic social relationships as necessary responses to the rigid class hierarchy of Victorian society. Rather than perceiving herself as unethical, she unconsciously frames her actions as rational efforts to survive within an environment that offers limited opportunities for individuals of humble origin. Her determination to establish influential relationships illustrates this mechanism, as Thackeray observes that “*Rebecca had determined upon making friends with everybody*” (Thackeray, Ch. XIII). Although the statement appears to describe ordinary sociability, psychoanalytic analysis indicates that Becky reconstructs manipulation as social intelligence, thereby minimizing internal conflict. This interpretation expands previous studies that emphasize Becky's opportunism by demonstrating that her moral reasoning itself functions as an unconscious psychological defense. Consequently, rationalization allows Becky to preserve self-esteem while engaging in increasingly strategic and instrumental forms of social interaction. Recent psychological research suggests that rationalization is closely associated with self-protective cognitive processes, enabling individuals to preserve self-esteem and maintain a coherent self-image when confronted with situations that threaten their competence or personal identity (Zogmaister & Maricuțoiu, 2022). In addition, studies on moral cognition indicate that cognitive distortions underlying rationalization frequently neutralize internal moral conflict by providing justifications that reduce psychological discomfort without requiring individuals to confront the true motives behind their behavior (Lee, 2022).

Another important defense mechanism identified in Becky is sublimation, which Freud regarded as one of the most adaptive forms of ego defense because it redirects instinctive impulses into socially acceptable achievements. Rather than expressing aggression or frustration directly, Becky channels her desire for power and security into refined social behavior, intellectual ability, artistic talent, and remarkable adaptability. The narrator repeatedly portrays Becky as exceptionally skilled in conversation and social performance, noting that she “*could be genteel with the genteel, witty with the witty*” (Thackeray, Ch. XIII). This versatility should not be interpreted merely as superficial charm but as evidence of sublimation, through which unconscious anxiety is transformed into socially rewarded

competence. Becky therefore converts the psychological energy generated by fear into motivation for achievement, allowing her to navigate elite social circles despite her disadvantaged background. Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that sublimation cannot eliminate the underlying anxiety that motivates her ambition. Instead, external success temporarily masks internal insecurity, demonstrating that even mature defense mechanisms possess inherent psychological limitations.

Projection and denial further strengthen Becky's defensive system by protecting her from emotional responsibility and self-criticism. Projection occurs when unacceptable qualities are unconsciously attributed to other individuals rather than recognized within oneself. The findings show that Becky frequently interprets society as manipulative, selfish, and hypocritical while overlooking the same tendencies in her own behavior. Her cynical observation that *"Everybody is striving for what is not worth having"* illustrates this externalization of internal conflict. By perceiving manipulation as universal, Becky normalizes her own actions and reduces feelings of guilt. Denial operates in a complementary manner by allowing Becky to ignore emotional realities that threaten her independence. This mechanism becomes particularly evident in her relationship with Rawdon and her son, whom she repeatedly neglects while pursuing social advancement. Rather than confronting emotional obligations, Becky unconsciously excludes them from psychological awareness. These findings support Anna Freud's argument that multiple defense mechanisms often operate simultaneously, forming an integrated system that protects the ego from anxiety while gradually distancing the individual from authentic emotional experience. Recent psychodynamic research emphasizes that defensive functioning is best understood as a hierarchical and integrated system in which multiple mechanisms operate concurrently, with their combined pattern reflecting an individual's overall level of psychological adaptation rather than the use of any single defense in isolation (Lingiardi & Madeddu, 2025). Likewise, contemporary clinical evidence demonstrates that changes in defensive functioning are closely associated with interpersonal functioning and personality organization, suggesting that individuals rely on coordinated configurations of defense mechanisms to manage persistent anxiety and emotional distress (Yılmaz et al., 2025).

In contrast to Becky, Amelia Sedley employs a markedly different configuration of ego defense mechanisms because her anxiety originates from emotional rather than socioeconomic insecurity. The findings indicate that denial represents Amelia's most persistent defensive strategy. Unlike Becky, whose denial concerns responsibility, Amelia denies painful emotional reality. Even after George Osborne's death, Amelia refuses to acknowledge his imperfections and continues to idealize his memory. The narrator repeatedly emphasizes this tendency, stating that *"To her, George was perfect still"* and that she *"would not hear one word against him"* (Thackeray, Ch. XL). Psychoanalytically, denial enables Amelia to preserve emotional attachment by rejecting information that contradicts her idealized perception of George. While this mechanism reduces the immediate pain of grief, it simultaneously prevents healthy adaptation to loss because reality is unconsciously reconstructed in a psychologically comforting form.

Closely associated with denial is Amelia's extensive use of idealization. Anna Freud describes idealization as a defense through which individuals exaggerate the positive qualities of emotionally significant figures to reduce anxiety. Throughout the novel, Amelia consistently transforms George into an almost flawless figure despite abundant evidence of his selfishness and emotional immaturity. Even years after his death, George remains psychologically perfect in Amelia's memory. This defensive process preserves emotional continuity by allowing Amelia to maintain an enduring attachment to someone who no longer exists. However, idealization also distorts reality because it prevents objective evaluation of George's character. The findings therefore suggest that Amelia's enduring loyalty reflects not simply moral virtue

but an unconscious strategy for avoiding the emotional disruption associated with accepting imperfection and loss. Consequently, her emotional world remains centered upon an idealized past rather than the evolving realities of the present.

The findings further reveal that reaction formation, displacement, and regression collectively reinforce Amelia's emotional dependence. Reaction formation enables Amelia to conceal painful emotions beneath exaggerated expressions of happiness and composure. Following emotionally distressing events, she repeatedly attempts to reassure others that she is content despite clear narrative evidence of sadness. This discrepancy between external behavior and internal emotion illustrates Anna Freud's proposition that individuals may unconsciously express feelings opposite to those they genuinely experience. Meanwhile, displacement allows Amelia to redirect grief for George toward her son Georgy, as the narrator observes that "*All her affection seemed centred upon her little boy*" (Thackeray, Ch. XLVII). Rather than resolving grief directly, Amelia transfers emotional attachment to a psychologically safer object. Regression similarly emerges after George's death when Amelia increasingly depends upon Dobbin for guidance and emotional support. Instead of developing greater autonomy, she unconsciously returns to earlier patterns of dependence that provide psychological comfort during periods of uncertainty. These findings indicate that Amelia's defense mechanisms successfully preserve emotional stability while simultaneously restricting independence and personal growth.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Becky and Amelia employ fundamentally different defensive systems because they confront different forms of unconscious anxiety. Becky's defenses are primarily outward-oriented, enabling her to manipulate external circumstances, pursue social mobility, and maintain psychological independence despite significant socioeconomic disadvantage. Amelia's defenses, by contrast, are inward-oriented, allowing her to preserve emotional attachment, loyalty, and psychological continuity in the face of grief and abandonment. Although both characters succeed in reducing anxiety, neither achieves complete psychological resolution because defense mechanisms regulate emotional conflict without eliminating its underlying causes. Becky ultimately sacrifices intimacy in exchange for autonomy, whereas Amelia sacrifices autonomy in exchange for emotional security. This finding strongly supports Anna Freud's theoretical proposition that defense mechanisms are neither inherently healthy nor unhealthy; rather, their adaptive value depends upon the flexibility with which they are employed and the long-term consequences they produce. Through Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, Thackeray presents two psychologically coherent yet contrasting illustrations of how unconscious defensive processes shape personality, relationships, and identity, thereby reinforcing the enduring relevance of psychoanalytic theory for literary analysis.

The Influence of Ego Defense Mechanisms on Relationships and Life Decisions

The findings demonstrate that the ego defense mechanisms employed by Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley extend beyond the regulation of internal anxiety and significantly influence their interpersonal relationships, social interactions, and major life decisions. According to Freud (1926), defense mechanisms do not merely reduce emotional distress but also shape behavioral patterns by mediating the relationship between unconscious desires and external reality. Anna Freud (1936) further argues that when particular defense mechanisms are repeatedly employed, they gradually become integrated into an individual's personality and influence long-term patterns of adaptation. The analysis of *Vanity Fair* supports these theoretical perspectives by revealing that the protagonists' contrasting life trajectories are largely determined by the ways in which they unconsciously manage anxiety. Becky develops relationships that prioritize control, opportunity, and self-preservation, while Amelia forms relationships based on emotional attachment, dependence, and loyalty. Although both

approaches successfully reduce immediate psychological tension, they also generate distinct long-term consequences that ultimately shape each character's destiny.

The influence of Becky Sharp's defense mechanisms is particularly evident in her interpersonal relationships. Because repression, rationalization, and denial consistently suppress emotional vulnerability, Becky approaches relationships as instruments for achieving security rather than as opportunities for genuine intimacy. Throughout the novel she carefully evaluates every social interaction according to its potential benefits, demonstrating that emotional considerations are secondary to practical objectives. This tendency appears from the beginning of the narrative when Becky enters aristocratic society after leaving Miss Pinkerton's academy. Rather than seeking acceptance through sincerity, she consciously develops relationships that may improve her social position. Thackeray remarks that "*Rebecca had determined upon making friends with everybody*" (Thackeray, Ch. XIII), illustrating her deliberate effort to expand her social network. Psychoanalytically, this behavior reflects sublimation because Becky transforms her fear of exclusion into socially acceptable ambition. Instead of expressing anxiety directly, she channels psychological energy into strategic relationship building, allowing her to navigate a social environment that would otherwise marginalize her. Consequently, friendship becomes less an expression of emotional closeness than an adaptive strategy for reducing insecurity.

The findings also indicate that rationalization strongly influences Becky's decisions regarding marriage and social mobility. Rather than selecting relationships based primarily on affection, she consistently evaluates them according to their capacity to improve her financial stability and social status. Her interactions with Rawdon Crawley and Lord Steyne demonstrate that practical considerations repeatedly outweigh emotional attachment. The narrator notes that Becky "*was not ashamed of the part she played*" (Thackeray, Ch. XLVII), suggesting that she experiences little conscious guilt regarding morally ambiguous relationships. From the perspective of Anna Freud's theory, rationalization enables Becky to reinterpret manipulation as necessity, thereby preserving a positive self-image while reducing psychological conflict. Instead of perceiving herself as exploiting others, she unconsciously constructs a narrative in which strategic behavior becomes essential for survival within a society characterized by rigid class inequality. This finding expands previous literary interpretations by demonstrating that Becky's controversial decisions are psychologically coherent responses to chronic insecurity rather than merely expressions of selfish ambition.

Despite facilitating remarkable social advancement, Becky's defensive strategies gradually undermine her family relationships. The continuous repression of emotional needs and denial of interpersonal responsibility prevent the development of genuine intimacy with both her husband and her son. Thackeray explicitly observes that "*The little Rawdon did not much increase his mother's affection*" (Thackeray, Ch. XV), emphasizing the emotional distance that characterizes Becky's experience of motherhood. Likewise, her relationship with Rawdon increasingly deteriorates as social ambition becomes the dominant organizing principle of her life. Rather than functioning as a partnership based on mutual trust, the marriage gradually becomes defined by misunderstanding, emotional neglect, and conflicting priorities. Anna Freud (1936) argues that defense mechanisms become maladaptive when they rigidly restrict emotional expression, and Becky exemplifies this process throughout the novel. Although repression initially protects her from vulnerability, it ultimately prevents emotional reciprocity, leaving her increasingly isolated despite achieving the social recognition she had long desired.

The long-term consequences of Becky's defensive system become particularly apparent near the conclusion of the novel. After years of prioritizing ambition over emotional connection, Becky achieves many of the external goals that initially motivated her behavior. Nevertheless, these accomplishments fail to provide lasting psychological satisfaction because

the underlying anxiety remains unresolved. Thackeray eventually describes Becky as “*alone, and friendless*”, highlighting the paradoxical outcome of her lifelong pursuit of independence. The findings therefore support Freud's proposition that defense mechanisms alleviate immediate anxiety without addressing its unconscious source. Becky succeeds in protecting herself from dependence and poverty, yet she ultimately experiences another form of insecurity characterized by emotional isolation and the absence of authentic human relationships. This outcome illustrates that psychological adaptation based exclusively on self-protection may achieve external success while simultaneously diminishing emotional well-being.

In contrast, Amelia Sedley's defense mechanisms influence her relationships in almost the opposite direction. Whereas Becky avoids emotional dependence, Amelia continually reinforces it through denial, idealization, displacement, and regression. The findings reveal that her interpersonal relationships are guided less by strategic calculation than by the need to preserve emotional attachment. Her marriage to George Osborne exemplifies this pattern because she consistently overlooks his weaknesses while maintaining unwavering devotion. Even after George's death, the narrator states that “*To her, George was perfect still*” and that she “*would not hear one word against him*” (Thackeray, Ch. XL). These passages demonstrate that idealization significantly shapes Amelia's perception of reality. Rather than evaluating George objectively, she unconsciously preserves an idealized version of him that protects her from the psychological pain of loss. As a result, her emotional attachment remains directed toward the past, limiting her ability to establish new relationships or reinterpret previous experiences realistically.

Amelia's reliance on regression and displacement also exerts a profound influence on her family relationships and life decisions. Following George's death, she redirects much of her emotional energy toward her son Georgy, whom the narrator describes as the center of her affection: “*All her affection seemed centred upon her little boy*” (Thackeray, Ch. XLVII). Psychoanalytically, displacement enables Amelia to maintain emotional attachment without directly confronting grief. At the same time, regression encourages increasing dependence upon Dobbin, who gradually assumes the role of emotional protector. Rather than developing greater autonomy after experiencing tragedy, Amelia unconsciously returns to earlier patterns of dependence because they provide psychological comfort. These findings support Anna Freud's explanation that regression frequently occurs when individuals encounter overwhelming emotional conflict that exceeds their capacity for conscious coping. Consequently, Amelia's relationships become increasingly characterized by loyalty and affection but also by limited independence and reduced self-determination.

The influence of Amelia's defense mechanisms is equally evident in her major life decisions. Throughout the novel she repeatedly postpones opportunities for personal growth because accepting change would require abandoning the emotional security provided by her memories of George. Even Dobbin's unwavering devotion is initially insufficient to overcome Amelia's unconscious attachment to the past. Rather than evaluating present circumstances objectively, her decisions remain governed by denial and idealization. This finding illustrates Freud's concept of fixation, whereby psychological development becomes arrested because the ego remains attached to an earlier emotional stage. Amelia therefore prioritizes continuity over adaptation, preserving emotional stability at the expense of personal independence. Although this strategy protects her from immediate psychological distress, it simultaneously delays the emotional maturation necessary for establishing a balanced and autonomous identity.

A comparison of both protagonists demonstrates that their defense mechanisms produce contrasting yet equally significant consequences for relationships and life decisions. Becky achieves considerable independence because her defenses encourage initiative, adaptability, and social mobility; however, these same mechanisms gradually erode intimacy, trust, and emotional fulfillment. Amelia, on the other hand, preserves affection, loyalty, and interpersonal

warmth because her defenses emphasize attachment rather than control; nevertheless, these mechanisms also reinforce dependence, inhibit self-confidence, and restrict psychological growth. The findings therefore suggest that neither defensive system can be regarded as entirely adaptive or entirely maladaptive. Instead, each represents a different psychological compromise between emotional security and personal development. This conclusion strongly supports Anna Freud's (1936) assertion that defense mechanisms possess dual functions: they protect the ego from anxiety while simultaneously shaping enduring patterns of personality that may either facilitate or hinder long-term adjustment.

Overall, the present findings demonstrate that *Vanity Fair* offers a remarkably sophisticated literary representation of the relationship between unconscious anxiety, ego defense mechanisms, and human behavior. Thackeray portrays Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley not as simplistic moral opposites but as psychologically complex individuals whose relationships and life decisions emerge from different strategies of coping with insecurity. Becky externalizes anxiety through ambition, emotional control, and calculated social interaction, while Amelia internalizes anxiety through attachment, idealization, and emotional dependence. Although these strategies enable each character to survive within the constraints of Victorian society, both ultimately experience high psychological costs. The comparative analysis therefore reinforces Freud's central proposition that unconscious defense mechanisms influence not only emotional regulation but also the formation of identity, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the direction of an individual's life course. By integrating psychoanalytic theory with close textual analysis, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of *Vanity Fair* as both a social critique and a profound exploration of the psychological processes that shape human experience.

Discussion Summary

This chapter has examined the hidden fears and ego defense mechanisms of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* through a psychoanalytic framework. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's theory of anxiety and Anna Freud's classification of ego defense mechanisms, the analysis demonstrates that the characters' behaviors are not merely moral choices or narrative devices, but psychological responses to unconscious fears shaped by social and emotional pressures.

The findings reveal that Becky Sharp's dominant hidden fears stem from social insecurity, fear of poverty, dependence, emotional vulnerability, and exposure. These fears generate ego anxiety, which Becky manages through active and outward-oriented defense mechanisms such as repression, rationalization, sublimation, projection, and denial. As a result, Becky develops a strategic and adaptive personality that enables social mobility and survival within Victorian society. However, these same defenses also inhibit emotional intimacy and moral reflection, leading to fractured relationships and eventual emotional isolation.

In contrast, Amelia Sedley's hidden fears are primarily rooted in emotional insecurity, fear of abandonment, loneliness, emotional change, and self-reliance. Her anxiety manifests through inward-oriented and emotionally preservative defense mechanisms, including denial, idealization, reaction formation, displacement, and regression. While these defenses provide emotional stability and comfort, they also reinforce passivity, dependence, and resistance to personal growth. Consequently, Amelia's life decisions are shaped more by emotional endurance than conscious autonomy.

A comparative analysis highlights that although both characters experience anxiety and employ ego defense mechanisms, the nature and function of their defenses differ significantly. Becky's defenses are adaptive in a competitive social context but emotionally destructive, whereas Amelia's defenses are emotionally protective but psychologically limiting. This

contrast illustrates how unconscious fears can lead to divergent behavioral patterns and life outcomes, even within the same social environment.

Overall, Chapter IV demonstrates that *Vanity Fair* presents a complex psychological portrait of human behavior, revealing how unconscious fears and ego defense mechanisms govern relationships, ambitions, and life choices. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Thackeray's characters emerge not simply as moral opposites, but as individuals shaped by distinct psychological strategies for coping with anxiety and insecurity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that both Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* experience hidden fears that profoundly shape their personalities, interpersonal relationships, and life decisions. Becky's fears center on poverty, social insignificance, dependence, emotional vulnerability, and isolation, whereas Amelia's fears stem from abandonment, loneliness, emotional change, and self-reliance. To cope with these anxieties, Becky employs repression, rationalization, sublimation, projection, and denial, while Amelia relies on denial, reaction formation, displacement, regression, and idealization. These ego defense mechanisms function as unconscious psychological strategies that help both characters manage anxiety and maintain emotional stability. However, they also produce different life outcomes: Becky's defenses foster ambition and social adaptability but ultimately lead to emotional isolation and unstable relationships, whereas Amelia's defenses provide emotional security at the cost of dependence, passivity, and delayed personal growth. Overall, *Vanity Fair* demonstrates that hidden fears and ego defense mechanisms play a central role in shaping human behavior, illustrating how unconscious psychological processes influence relationships, decisions, and life outcomes.

Suggestion

This study suggests that future research should examine *Vanity Fair* through alternative psychological perspectives, such as Jung's analytical psychology, Adler's individual psychology, or Erikson's psychosocial theory, to provide broader insights into the characters' psychological development. Further studies may also investigate other major characters, including Rawdon Crawley, George Osborne, and William Dobbin, or conduct comparative analyses with other literary works that explore similar issues of anxiety, emotional dependency, social ambition, and personality development. It is expected that this research contributes to psychoanalytic literary criticism by enhancing understanding of the relationship between hidden fears, ego defense mechanisms, and human behavior, while also encouraging readers to recognize the influence of unconscious psychological processes on individual decisions and interpersonal relationships in both literature and real life.

Author Contributions

The first author was responsible for formulating the research concept, data collection, data analysis, and drafting the manuscript. The second author contributed to the development of the conceptual framework, interpretation of the research results, and the review and refinement of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the published article.

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